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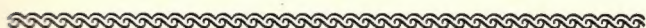
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Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

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CHARACTERS

AXEL OF AUERSPERG
THE ARCHDEACON
MASTER JANUS
COMMANDER KASPAR OF AUERSPERG
UKKO, AXEL OF AUERSPERG'S PAGE
HERR ZACHARIAS
GOTTHOLD
HARTWIG
MIKLAUS
THE CELEBRANT OF THE OFFICE OF THE DEAD
EVE SARA EMMANUÈLE DE MAUPERS
THE ABBESS
SISTER ALOYSE
SISTER LAUDATION, PORTRESS
SISTER CALIXTE, BURSAR
NUNS OF THE SAINT APOLLODORA CLOISTER
CHORUS OF THE OLD MILITARY RETAINERS OF AUERSPERG
CHORUS OF WOODCUTTERS

The action takes place around 1828.

Part One, in a convent of Trinitarian nuns, the Saint Apollodora Cloister, situated on the coastal borders of what was once French Flanders.

Parts Two, Three, and Four, in Northeast Germany, in the very ancient fortified castle of the margraves of Auersperg, isolated in the depths of the Black Forest.



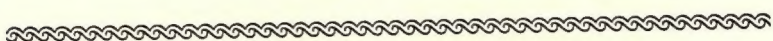
PART ONE

THE WORLD OF RELIGION

*Cœurs tendres, approchez: ici l'on aime encore
Mais l'amour, épuré, s'allume sur l'autel:
Tout ce qu'il a d'humain à ce feu s'évapore,
Tout ce qui reste est immortel.*

LAMARTINE

. . . AND COMPEL THEM TO COME IN!



The cloistral choir in the chapel of an ancient abbey.

At the back, a large stained-glass window. To the left, four rows of stalls. They rise gradually, forming a semicircle against the high circular grille, which is closed and veiled with hangings. At the back, near the grille, a low door, above stone steps, leading to the cloister.

To the right, facing the stalls, the seven steps and footpace of the high altar, which is out of sight. The carpet extends to the middle of the choir, to the edge of the tombstones. On the second step, a hand-bell and gold censers. Higher up, baskets of flowers. The sanctuary lamp is the only light in the choir, hanging between the large supporting pillars of the apse, which are covered with ex-votos: there, on wings, rises the white marble pulpit.

A human shape—completely veiled, its bare feet sandaled—is standing under the lamp. From the back, enter THE ABBESS and THE ARCHDEACON, in liturgical vestments.

THE PRIEST kneels before the altar and remains at prayers. THE ABBESS approaches the veiled creature and brusquely uncover its head.

A mysteriously beautiful face is disclosed—the face of a woman. She stands motionless, with folded arms and lowered eyes. THE ABBESS looks at her for a few moments, in silence.

SCENE I

SARA, THE ABBESS, THE ARCHDEACON, *then* SISTER ALOYSE

THE ABBESS. Sara! It is Christmas Eve, and midnight will soon ring out, filling our souls with gladness! The altar will light up, like the Ark of the Covenant! and our prayers will take flight on the wings of the hymns! Before this hour passes

... And Compel Them to Come In!

into the heavens, I must inform you of the holy resolution I have made concerning your future.

Remember, Sara. Your father and mother, both near death, summoned me to their manor, that they might entrust you to me. For seven years you have lived in this cloister, free as a child in a garden. Yet children's games were always foreign to you, and I have never seen you smile. What can be the meaning of so studious and solitary a nature? Will a constant rereading of all our old books humble your spirit?

Listen, Sara, you are an obscure creature. Your pale face shines with the reflection of some ancient pride. It is dormant within you. . . . Oh! the music you play on the organ has given you away! . . . It is so somber that I had to ask Sister Aloyse to replace you.—Despite the discretion and simplicity of your rare words and of your every action, I have pondered over you long and searchingly. I feel that I do not know you. You submit to the practices of our obedience with a kind of silent indifference. Take care that your heart doesn't harden!

My daughter, you are a lamp in a tomb: I want to revive you for Hope. A life without prayer is Vanity! You have lived twenty-three years of your life: now Grace is what must save you. Grace! And may you give all of yourself to God, who brings peace to troubled hearts. Of course, according to the ways of man, I should have to grant that you are free to leave us; but according to the ways of God, can I, who have cure of your soul, let you go back into the world alone, rich, and so beautiful—amid all those temptations (and I am well aware not only of their violent charms but of their deadly disillusion)? Since you have been entrusted to my care, have I the right, under the circumstances, not to do what is best for your true happiness, incapable as you are of perceiving it for yourself?—The experience of sensual pleasure leads to despair: later on, in spite of yourself, you would not have the strength to return; I must anticipate that for you. What?

With vertigo lying in wait for you at the brink of the abyss, would I not have the right to save you from its spell? My abstaining would be a treacherous weakness for which you would surely bring me to account on the last day. Not to keep hold of you when you would plunge into darkness! with neither a religious adviser nor a family! and with the ardent spirit which, I suspect, lies behind your lowered eyes? No! No. You would not know how to behave, out there, in accordance with God's will. I shall therefore offer you to Him this very evening. Yes, tonight.

A pause.

My daughter, when I first mentioned this to you three months ago, I met with a refusal. I had to resort to the *in-pace*, to harsh privation, to mortification. . . . And while you—altogether resigned, in fact—did penance, I had prayers said for you, and I myself interceded fervently, offering my tears to Him who is all forgiveness.

So do not force me any longer to have recourse to harsh discipline, that you may examine your conscience and be impelled, as it were, toward Heaven. Today, on this glorious holiday evening, I took you out of your darkened cell; I chose this blessed night to consecrate you to the Lord, amid flowers, lights, and incense. You shall be the bitter bride of this nuptial evening.

Thus grace will descend upon you; oblivion will free your spirit from turmoil; you shall soon feel the weight of divine love; and one day (perhaps not so far off!), thrilling to the memory of this holy hour, you will embrace me, your cheeks bathed in tears of ecstasy and joy. And it will be the moving and edifying spectacle reserved for virgins who dwell in the shadow of this altar. And you will then understand what I dared to do, what I took upon myself to achieve.—Come now, may peace be with you.

She turns away.

Sister Laudation, light the candles.

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

During this last part of the scene the altar lights up gradually.

Now, my sister, my daughter, as I have told you: you are among the rich of this world. One enters here casting off all pride and all wealth. We are poor; but what we have we give, for poverty is ennobling only by way of charity. You have inherited castles, palaces, woods, and plains. Here is the parchment by which you make over all your possessions to the community. And here is a pen. Sign.

SARA *unfolds her arms, picks up the pen, and signs impassively.*

Good. All is in order.

She looks at SARA, who is again motionless.

Thank you.

To herself, as she walks up to THE ARCHDEACON.

May God see me—and judge me!

Now close to the old priest, she touches his shoulder and, bending over, whispers a few words.

THE ARCHDEACON, *rising and in a low voice.* Fasting, a darkened cell, and silence create light in such proud souls: it had to be done! it must still be done!

Walking up to SARA.

Sara, Sister Emmanuèle in God! The few doubts that made us fear the presence round you of the Evil One have now vanished. I may say truly that on such a day we would have dismissed from our minds any troubling thoughts about you; but the alms that God empowered you to give us have altogether purified you, in our eyes; of any suspicion of half-heartedness. They will militate for you in despair and abjection. I shall soon receive you as one of those who are henceforth your sisters. You have long been considered by them, and by us, as a soul with a calling, a chosen soul. Your novitiate is over.

THE ABBESS. My daughter, we are going to clothe you in a wedding dress and on your brow place the crown of the Holy

Axel

Virgin, as a symbol of the future nuptials. You will then, in the midst of the hymns, come to this place. Here you will lie down full length as a sign of death; and over you will be flung the shroud of our departed. Under this stone lies the Blessed Saint who founded this convent and to whom you will pray most especially before the offertory. Once the vows are taken, your worldly hair will fall under the scissors of our rule. Then you will be clothed in the sacred habit that you will keep till the end of your days of affliction, here below.

A young nun, merely a child, with a charming face, in a white and blue habit, appears behind the altar. She seems a bit wan. She looks at SARA.

I shall soon be gone to my eternity; you will inherit my ivory crosier and you will do, in turn . . . what I am doing now.

Turning away.

Come here, Sister Aloyse!

The nun approaches.

SCENE II

THE SAME, SISTER ALOYSE

THE ABBESS, *continuing*. Sister Aloyse, here is your companion, the favorite sister whom you love tenderly and who is our darling daughter. Your voice will be sweeter to her than mine, and I count on your good words to dispel the temptations that could arise in her heart at this final hour.

A pause.

You love her very much, don't you?

SISTER ALOYSE, *grave*. Yes, Mother.

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

THE ABBESS. I entrust her to your affection. You will keep vigil and pray with her, in the oratory, until a quarter before midnight.

THE ABBESS *walks back to the base of the pulpit, where THE ARCHDEACON is standing. The priest is now examining parchments and papers under a lamp that SISTER LAUDATION has just placed on one of the arms of a stall.*

SISTER ALOYSE, *aside, approaching SARA.* O Lord!

Clasping her hands on SARA's shoulder, and in a very low, almost faint voice.

Sara, remember our roses on the tomb-lined path! You came to me as the sister for whom I dared not hope. After God, there is you. If you wish me to die, I will die. Remember my brow resting on your pale hands, one evening, at sundown. I shall never recover from the sight of you. Alas! You are my beloved! . . . I languish for you. The only strength I have comes from you.

A pause.

Yield, become as we are, under a veil! Share the momentary ordeal. You know full well that we can never live!—We should be together so soon, as one soul, in the same Heaven! . . . Sara, see the starry sky deep within my eyes: there recede the skies, forever starry! Let yourself come! I want to dress you myself as a divine bride, an ineffable spouse, a heavenly creature. Grief has made me charming, and if you look at me, you will no longer spurn me sadly. What words can I find that would make you yield? Sara, Sara!

Silently, SARA unfolds her arms. She leans her head over, touching that of the novice, who takes her hand, and they both cross the sanctuary.

Oh! don't press your brow against mine! . . . my knees are giving way!

SARA has drawn herself up, and with one hand supporting

Axel

SISTER ALOYSE, *who has turned white as her veil, they slowly walk out together through the side apse.*

THE ABBESS, *leaning against a pillar, thoughtful, and following them with her eyes.* The worst has happened! The child already feels the raptures and ecstasies of Hell! Seduction of the angels of darkness! The scandalously excessive and dangerous beauty of Sara stirs and troubles that chosen heart. *Pondering.*

Sister Aloyse shall cut her hair tonight; she shall remain without a veil—bareheaded—until Epiphany.

THE ARCHDEACON, *walking up to her.* Sister, here are the patrimonial title-deeds of Sara de Maupers and the records concerning her; they will become the convent's property; the wealth they represent will supplement our very modest revenue; receive them; and tomorrow, send them to the bursary.

SCENE III

THE ABBESS, THE ARCHDEACON, *then* SISTER LAUDATION

THE ABBESS, *taking the parchments, indifferently.* Thank you, Father.

As she rolls them up and ties them together, her eyes become more heedful.

The arms! . . . Haven't I seen them somewhere before? The oriental escutcheon, supported by those strange golden sphinxes . . . and this ducal crest . . .

Near the lamp, she bends over the title deeds:

Azure, a winged Death's Head, argent, over seven estoiles, of the second, in fess, with the motto based on the letters of the name:

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

MACTE ANIMO! ULTIMO PERFULGET SOLA

Prophetic words, God willing: Isn't Sara the last daughter of the Princes of Maupers? . . . But . . . these jewels, or gems, of various tinctures, encircling the Death's Head in chief, are unreadable in heraldry: and I cannot understand . . .

THE ARCHDEACON, *drawing near*. Do you wish to decipher the more than strange but seven-hundred-year-old coat of arms of this house? I just happened to be glancing through the legend. It is indeed the escutcheon of the Maupers—who actually shared it with a certain German branch of a high Austro-Hungarian house, the Counts of Auersperg—an illustrious family, with many branches!

THE ABBESS, *with a start*. Auersperg! . . . And . . . nothing in this story has any bearing on Sara's inheritance?

THE ARCHDEACON, *smiling*. I should not imagine so: it is merely a tale of chivalry and the Crusades, in which the fantastic surpasses reality. This is the story: the heads of those two families were, it would seem, both ambassadors, one of France, the other of Germany, to a sultan (the Sultan El Kalab, according to a chronicle of the times). Now, a magus, who was consulted by a secret council of the Egyptian prince, managed to persuade both knights to substitute these mysterious golden sphinxes for the two lions that supported their common escutcheon. The Auersperg motto is still more incomprehensible:

ALTIUS RESURGERE SPERO GEMMATUS!

But enough of these vain traditions.—The postulant must prepare herself for the taking of the veil. You have, of course,

Axel

acquainted her with the rites of our liturgy, for her consecration?

THE ABBESS, *uneasy, interrupting him.* Mademoiselle de Maupers is preparing for the ceremony, yes, Father.

A pause; then, as though suddenly giving way to an inner obsession.

Before the Divine Office, I should like to ask for your enlightened estimate of a group of special circumstances that are constantly on my mind. These circumstances have led me to an assumption . . . of such an extraordinary nature . . . that I hesitate to take, on my own, a misgiving for a certainty: I need your opinion. It is about Sara. Father, this young girl, tall and white as a paschal candle, has a heart that is closed to us, and she knows many things.

THE ARCHDEACON. I, too, distrust the stubborn lamb. Yet I think that in the end the conventual rule will break the untamed child. I mean, it will bring her back to us; yes, I hope that with grace and with her moving toward God, all will go well. But, come, is her behavior basically delinquent?

THE ABBESS. She is too coldly flawless. I have punished her to test her constancy. She has accepted everything, but I tell you, Father, her submission is all on the surface. With her, chastisement loses its edge and confirms her in her pride. *Breaking off, as if to herself.*

That girl is like steel, which bends all the way to its center, then snaps back or breaks; she has (if I may use the expression) the soul of a rapier. And more than once the sight of her has caused even me a kind of occult anguish.

THE ARCHDEACON. Has she ever tried to escape from the priory?

THE ABBESS, *shaking her head.* She is aware of being observed

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

vigilantly day and night; any attempt to flee would make her liable to even stricter seclusion.

THE ARCHDEACON, *looking at her, and after a moment.* When judging in this way, one must, oneself, beware of speaking under the influence of the Devil!—It would be well to inform Sister Emmanuèle, as a forewarning, of the measures we are taking in her regard, that's all.

THE ABBESS, *with a vague and cold smile.* Under Demonic influence! . . . Well! Father, judge for yourself: here are the facts, in their exact sequence. I find them . . . somber.

She sits down, leans her elbows on a stall, and meditates for a few minutes; then slowly, and looking up at THE ARCHDEACON, *who stands facing her.*

As you know, three centuries ago a very ancient sect of the Rosicrucians occupied this abbey during a war. They left various works here dealing, they say, with Tyrian dialects, forgotten idioms spoken in places like Gaza or Tadmor. . . . We kept these documents as curiosities.—To begin with, isn't it fantastic that I often caught Sara immersed in a patient study of these works? Ah! Please note this point well; it might soon be of great interest.

THE ARCHDEACON, *smiling at first, his face then clouding over.*

The fact is that she would have done better to meditate on her lauds. Also, these books are hardly filled with wisdom. . . . By tomorrow they must be destroyed, incinerated. . . . In order to save themselves from the stake, the Rosicrucians used to dissimulate abominable formulas in the guise of prayers. . . .

THE ABBESS. These books are now (but far too late!) in my cell.

Three years ago, one winter morning—it was Candlemas Eve, I remember—I went down to the library very early; and

Axel

there I found that amazing girl. She had spent the night there, all alone and in spite of the deadly cold. She did not see me enter; she did not see that I was watching her! . . . She had almost finished burning, with her lamp, the first leaf of a dusty missal, the first parchment leaf of that Gothic Book of Hours, with enameled clasps, which at one time was sent to us from Germany by a correspondent of His Grace, the Patriarch Pol, our pious bishop.

THE ARCHDEACON. Yes . . . I remember . . . by a doctor from Hungary, whom the patriarch himself didn't know and had never seen: Doctor . . . Janus.

The seven flames around the sanctuary lamp cast a very bright light and then go out all at once.

THE ABBESS, *calling*. Sister Laudation! . . . Quickly! The lamp! The lamp! . . . What could have happened? You will confess your sin, in the refectory!

SISTER LAUDATION *runs in clasping her hands.*

SISTER LAUDATION, *upset, in a kind of frenzy*. Mother, I forgot to fill it this evening! It's true! And that has never happened since I have had the keys on my belt.

She relights the lamp silently; then withdraws behind the altar.

SCENE IV

THE ARCHDEACON, THE ABBESS

Alone.

THE ABBESS. Father, do you at all remember the leaf I mentioned? It was covered with surprisingly shaped characters to which we paid little attention, since we were unable to translate them.

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

THE ARCHDEACON. Indeed: a pious invocation, no doubt?

THE ABBESS, *more and more thoughtful*. The characters had a very strange resemblance to those whose meaning is given in the books of the Rosicrucians! The parchment was super-added, in the missal, and stamped with the seal of these arms. *She shows him the title deeds.*

THE ARCHDEACON, *after a moment*. I still don't make out very well what is in your mind. Continue, Sister. How does this insignificant . . . and, to a certain degree, praiseworthy . . . action . . . ?

THE ABBESS, *with fixed eyes and as though speaking to herself*.

At that moment Sara's features were shining with an expression of mysterious joy! A profound and terrible joy. No, what she had just read was not a prayer! . . . Her look had something solemnly obscure about it, something unforgettable.—I questioned her unexpectedly, keeping my eyes on hers. The glance she gave me, as she slowly looked up, was so vacant that I got an impression of danger. She answered, after a pause and turning very pale, that she had just simply destroyed a vain recollection of pride . . . her own coat of arms, which she had recognized on the page. Suspicious fervor! I reread the patriarch's letter to verify her statement. The book, in fact, originally came from the late chatelaine of Auersperg—and this would now seem to explain Sara's words. . . . However, Father, I confess that ever since that moment, which was over in a flash, yes, ever since, I have had a particular idea . . . oh! a confused and perhaps superstitious idea—but I cannot put it out of my mind! . . . What I suspect about Sara may alone lead us to the key to that impenetrable, solemn, and chilling nature of hers we have observed. Have you not seen her, as I have, walking under

Axel

the arcade of the cloister, concentrating and apparently lost in some silent dream?

THE ARCHDEACON, *looking at her attentively*. You think that the girl . . . ?

THE ABBESS, *her face clouded over*. Yes, it is my personal and firm belief that Sara de Maupers deciphered some sinister counsel, some strange bit of information—a . . . supreme suggestion! an important secret, yes, Father! yes, I tell you, no doubt a momentous secret!—buried in that destroyed leaf.

THE ARCHDEACON, *after a moment*. Tell me, the public gates will be well closed this evening, won't they?

THE ABBESS. The iron bars on the portals of the church are fixed securely. The nave will remain empty. The sailors and people of the hamlet will go to midnight Mass in town.

THE ARCHDEACON. Good. Once the vows are taken, a strict watch must be kept on her.

THE ABBESS, *in a subdued voice*. But, really! . . . I believed and had to believe that this soul was not that unknown to you! So she doesn't accuse herself when she is in your chambers, on her knees . . .

THE ARCHDEACON, *interrupting her*. This I cannot answer: let us speak of what we know. The vows bestow special graces, and we realize that she has great need of them. True, I fear that, for her, mortification of the flesh is, so to speak, a necessity. . . .

THE ABBESS, *calm*. Of course, she must be saved! from herself! And if she has some infernal tares in her heart, they must be

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

rooted out for her salvation! And, for example, Father, look at the extent of this girl's power of attraction! I had asked the youngest of our lay sisters, Aloyse, who has a simple heart and the soul of an angel, to seek out her company. I was hoping in that way, sooner or later, to come upon some words she might have let slip . . . getting some insight into the thoughts at the back of her mind. What happened? Something unexpected, incredible. The face, the extraordinary beauty, of Mademoiselle de Maupers so profoundly fascinated Sister Aloyse that she became silent and apparently dazzled.

THE ARCHDEACON, *after a start*. Beware! That is akin to ancient magic! The loathsome fevers of the Earth and of Blood emit dismal vapors that thicken the air of the soul and suddenly hide, altogether, God's countenance.—Fasting and prayer are sometimes unavailing! . . . It is a dangerous thing, a dangerous thing!

Shivering.

Horrors!

THE ABBESS, *in an icy tone*. Father, I have averted other dangers. Tonight, while you are celebrating, with Sara, the Office of the Dead, her sponsor at the interrogatory will, as a matter of fact, be Sister Aloyse: I chose her for the penitent-interpreter. As for your homily, you might speak to Sara, Father, as if you had to smite the heart and mind of some sort of unbeliever . . . difficult to describe!—the mind, above all! Hers, I think, is one of the most abstract, the most profound! . . . My flock of white souls will not understand you: so there is no fear of shocking them. She alone will follow you, easily, I am sure, in those abysses of searching meditation, which are only too familiar to her.

THE ARCHDEACON, *very surprised and half smiling*. What! What are you saying? Are we dreaming?

THE ABBESS. Ah! If I dared to reveal . . . all that is on my mind! If I added that her very extensive knowledge, which has so often shown through her short, precise answers, gave me to believe, too late—when I thought I was letting her play at reading—that her extraordinary understanding had grasped, without any help, even the mysteries of all that erudition—hidden up there in thousands of such varied works!

THE ARCHDEACON, *now thoughtful*. A darkly mysterious orphan, indeed, tempted and captivated by so many books!

THE ABBESS. Mark my words: I believe she is endowed with that terrifying gift, Intelligence.

THE ARCHDEACON, *grave*. Well, may she tremble, if she does not grow to be a saint! Dreaming has lost so many souls! That gift, especially in a woman, becomes a flame more often than a light. . . . Come, she shall read no more until her faith has been really strengthened and sheds light on the nothingness of man's pages. You should have explained this peculiarity to me earlier. I see that I must resign myself this evening to being eloquent in my sermon of admonishment. Young minds darkened by precocious meditation are sensitive to the cheap tinsel of mortal languages. Eloquence! As though it were not trampled on by those who can say Our Father! and as though, for example, the dazzling words of Saint Paul: *Omnis christianus Christus est*, needed embellishment or vain commentary, when they express God! Alas! I understand the good Chrysostom and his tears of pity, probably of shame, when he saw his flock admire, as at theatre, the material harmony, the brilliant husk, the sensual beauty, the phraseology of his words! rather than become steeped in their substantial meaning. How he then asked God's forgiveness, for them and for himself, because of that ridiculous scandal!

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

Woe! A good lash of the scourge, long and humble prayers, some real hardship and some real fasting, that is worth something, that weighs in Death, that creates a right and strengthens the supernatural in us.—Well! If I must be eloquent to convince this imperiled soul . . .

Contemptuously.

. . . I will be this evening—yes, once the pedantic quotations of the holy schoolmen have been exhausted, I myself, as a rhetorician, will dare to combat her peccant indecision—but not forgetting the great prophetic words of the Psalmist: *Quoniam non cognovi litteraturam, introibo in potentias Dei.*

THE ABBESS. Still, I should think she is well disposed! Perhaps she is trying to play!—Look, she has just signed these papers in my hand, renouncing her worldly possessions.

THE ARCHDEACON, *looking at the deed of gift.* Ho! I forgot! That's true. So many poor to feed! Hundreds of them! So many pilgrims to succor! . . . Yes, perhaps she has been touched by efficient grace! perhaps we are being troubled by one of those pointless suspicions sent by the spirits of Evil, on solemn occasions, to startlingly awaken our weakness!

THE ABBESS. So many beds for the sick! So much white bread and so much cordial! So much good to be done with this gold extorted from Mammon!

THE ARCHDEACON, *musings.* The weapons of the Most Wicked will thus turn against himself! So peace be with us!

Both kneel before the altar: then, lifting their arms toward the Heavens, together, in full voice.

Glory to the God of the afflicted, who inspired the good Samaritan!

Axel

Bells. The altar is now lit up and its glow spreads throughout the enclosure.

CHOIR OF NUNS, *outside, walking and chanting.*

*O virgo! mater alma! fulgida Coeli portal
Te nunc flagitant devota corda et ora,
Nostra ut pura pectora sint et corpora!*

The door of the cloister opens; THE NUNS, in white habits, radiant and recollected, appear and enter the stalls, forming a semicircle. An OLD MAN, in an acolyte's surplice, appears from somewhere behind the altar and stands on the right-hand corner of the first step.

SCENE V

THE ARCHDEACON, THE ABBESS, SISTER LAUDATION, THE CELEBRANT
OF THE OFFICE OF THE DEAD, THE NUNS

Organ. The four rows of stalls are now filled. Two NUNS in festal habits approach the altar, take the censers, and cast incense into them. Others, standing on the steps, with baskets in their hands, pluck off the petals of their flowers and toss them, in handfuls, onto the footpace; THE ABBESS, holding the white crosier, is sitting in her abbatial chair. She has just put on a glittering cope. A hymn resounds. THE ARCHDEACON, clothed in a black stole, approaches: THE CELEBRANT kneels down. The gold hand-bell rings out, announcing the Introit.

A NUN, *alone.*

*In te, Domine, speravi: non confundar in
aeternum.*

THE CHOIR. *Amen.*

... And Compel Them to Come In!

THE ARCHDEACON.

Judica me, Deus, et discerne causam meam de gente non sancta! . . .

After a moment he climbs the steps to the Tabernacle. The first part of the Mass is continued in undertones, as midnight is awaited. Soon the bell rings for the offertory: all the nuns rise.

SCENE VI

THE SAME, SARA, and SISTER ALOYSE

Roll of the organ. SARA appears dressed in a long tunic of white moiré, the necklace of sacred opals on her breast. She leans her head on the shoulder of SISTER ALOYSE, who is pale and smiling. Orange blossoms are woven into her long loose black hair, which ripples down her dress. Her face seems sculptured in stone.

As she comes into view, flowers are cast in her path; the censers are raised.

She comes before the altar and kneels on the flagstone, silently; then she lies down full length, her forehead on her folded arms.

SISTER ALOYSE lets fall over her a huge white sheet, strewn with golden spots representing large tears, and covers her with it completely.

The mystic candle burns on the first step of the altar, above SARA's forehead.

THE ARCHDEACON, *standing on the footpace and turning toward the congregation.* Is there a soul here who wishes to crucify its mortal life by binding itself forever to the divine sacrifice I am about to offer?

Axel

SISTER ALOYSE, *coming forward.*

Ego pro defuncta illa! Ego vox ejus!

Standing near SARA and singing the formula of consecration:

*Suscipe me, Deus! secundum eloquium tuum,
et vivam!*

The passing bell tolls once.

CELEBRANT OF THE OFFICE OF THE DEAD.

*Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine, Domine
quis sustinebit!*

THE NUNS, *passing in procession round SARA, lighted candles in
their hands.*

Requiescat, et ei luceat perpetua Lux!

SISTER ALOYSE, *having sprinkled holy water on the shroud.*

Resurgam!

THE NUNS, *far-off voices in the organ loft.*

In excelsis.

THE CHOIR, *on stage.*

Amen.

Now the old ACOLYTE, right on the footpace of the altar, has clothed THE ARCHDEACON in the insignia in which the ancient Grand Priors of abbeys received the vows pontifically. The long black cope clasped onto his shoulders, the simple miter on his brow, and leaning on his gold crosier, THE ARCHDEACON—under the dark purple canopy embroidered with golden crossbones, held by four of the oldest teaching nuns of the Abbey, covered in long veils—walks down to SARA, who is still prostrate. The organ stops.

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

THE ARCHDEACON. If she who is already dead to the earth and lying here, before God's countenance, repudiates forever the wretched joys that can be offered by flesh and blood, may she be welcome at the foot of the altar!

SISTER ALOYSE, *pointing at SARA with both hands.*

Ecce ancilla Dei.

At these words, and during the silence that follows, SISTER LAUDATION, at a sign from THE ABBESS, approaches SISTER ALOYSE and hands her a pair of large silver scissors. SISTER ALOYSE takes them and, rigid, closes her eyes.

THE ARCHDEACON, *stopping on the third step, and to SARA.* Are you truly she who is called from on High, who wishes to live in the humble chastity that illumines us? She who, with Cecilia, wishes to cry out to the Throne: "*Fiat cor meum immaculatum ut non confundar!*", she who, in just a few days, lying on the noble wings of Death, will soar, in very saintly flight, toward the spirits blazing with love and life, the *beata Seraphim* spoken of by the pious Areopagite? O woman! If you come as an offering, a voluntary holocaust, for the love of God, you will become your own love realized, when you enter into your eternity.

Passing bell.

For eternity, as Saint Thomas so admirably remarked, is but the full possession of oneself in one and the same moment. And: "My love is my burden!" Saint Augustine tells us. So lose yourself, if you are a heavenly heart, in Him who is love itself! Believe and you shall live; for Faith, according to Saint Paul, is the very substance of the things for which one *should* hope.

Passing bell.

Through Faith, you shall be reborn, transfigured in your

own song, for the soul, in Saint Hildegarde's inspired words, is harmony. *Pulcher hymnus Dei homo immortalis!* said Lactantius as well, that most praiseworthy and eloquent spirit. Hate one thing only: any obstacle to your return to God! any limitation—that is to say, Evil! Hate it with all your might! For as Saint Isidore of Damietta so clearly pointed out, when the chosen lean over from the heights of Heaven to contemplate the torture of the damned, they will feel unutterable joy at the spectacle, for without that torture, the flowering of divine works and the collaudation of their infinite justice (which is the very *form* of Paradise) would be incomplete.

Oh! If you still do not understand the spirit of our dogmas, if they cause the clay you are made of to quake, may it be granted you to probe deeply into them, since God made you so strangely studious and persevering, as though you had been called to become like unto the greatest of saints. *Negligentie mihi videtur si non studemus quod credimus intelligere*, as Saint Anselm so aptly expressed it. But if you want to progress in the knowledge of God, study with humility and with, above all, an ever simple heart: in that way you will keep that dignity of Hope without which even humility lacks faultless value . . . and soon, no doubt, grace will teach you that the one means to understanding is prayer.

Do not forget that you will never be a pure spirit: your very soul, your undying soul, is composed, first of all, of *matter*, that you may enjoy and suffer eternally, remaining separate from God. *Materia prima*, said the Angelic Doctor, question seventy-five. . . . And remember that the bull of Clement V imposes excommunication on all who would dare to dream the contrary! And if, apart from mental obedience to the Church, your understanding rebels—and seeks God in some other way, alas!—repeat to yourself, for your salvation, this uneasy admission of a pagan orator: "The vanity, the weakness, of Man's reason is such that he would be unable

... And Compel Them to Come In!

to conceive of a God *whom he would wish to resemble!*" Know, then, how to curb any pride you might have in your paltry reason. Where but in prayer would one seek proof of God? Is not Faith the one proof of all things? No other, whether provided by the senses or by reason, would satisfy your mind, as you well know beforehand. So why bother even to seek? . . . Does believing not mean throwing oneself into the object of one's belief and there fulfilling oneself? Affirm as you are affirmed: surely, that is the wisest course! . . . Having then acquired the feeling of God's presence, through prayer, you will adhere to that wisdom! With a flap of the wings, you will have attained your hope.—Before you existed—that is, yesterday—God believed in you, since here you are, called forth out of Nothingness by Faith, the Maker! So send Him back the echo of His call. It is up to you to believe in Him! It is now your turn to CREATE HIM within yourself, with all the *being* of your life! You are here below not to seek "proof" but to give evidence of whether, through love and faith, you weigh the weight of salvation.

Passing bell.

Listen once again, as the bell for the dead tolls for you. If each of the Three Mysteries, the divine first principles, did not seem impossible and absurd to our eyes of clay and pride, what merit would we have in believing in them? And were they possible and reasonable, would you accept them as divine, when you, who are dust, could gauge them with a thought? If, therefore, they are absurd and impossible, they are precisely what they ought to be, and as Tertullian teaches, that is why, to begin with, they offer the prime assurance of their truth: their human absurdity is the one luminous point that makes them accessible to our ephemeral logic, on condition that we have Faith. So purify your soul forever of that speck of pride which excludes it from the sight of God; cease being human, be divine. The world treats us as madmen who delude themselves to the point of sacrificing their lives for a

childish dream, for the shadow of some fanciful heaven. But what man, when his time comes, does not realize that he has spent his life on bitter dreams never attained, on disappointing vanities, on disillusion after disillusion, none of which probably had any reality except in his mind? What right, then, has the world to be so arrogant when it merely pleased us to prefer, knowingly, the sublime dream of God to the mortal lies of the earth? . . . What! Our hearts are warmed, our serenity grows profound and unalarmed, the Heaven we divine imbues us, even here, with blessed love, for us prayer become a vision—exegesis, the very key to the Evidence . . . and the children of the world, in the name of the painful boredom caused them by the deceitful realities of the senses dare to call our positive happiness imaginary? Away with them!

Smiling.

Illusion for illusion, we keep *that* of God, which alone gives joy, light, strength, and peace to those eternally dazzled by it. No creature, no vitality, eludes Faith. Man prefers one belief to another, and for the man who doubts, vague as this thought of his may be, his doubt—which he freely admits in his mind—is but another form of Faith, since, in principle, it is as mysterious as our mysteries. However, the undecided lives with his indecision, which becomes the worthless sum of his existence. He thinks he “analyzes,” but he digs the grave of his soul and returns to a nothingness that can only be called Hell—since it is forever too late to be no more. We are irrevocable.

Passing bell.

Yes, Faith envelops us! The universe is but its symbol. One *must* think. One *must* act. We are forced into that slavery: thinking. Doubting it still means obeying it. Not an act that is not caused by an instinctive thought! Not a thought that is not blind in its original conception! Well, since we can become nothing but our thought united to the occult flesh of

... *And Compel Them to Come In!*

our acts, let us think and act in such a way that a God may become in us!—and do it at the very outset! if we wish to acquire belief—that is to say, *deserve* to believe.

All dreams contrary to the enhancement of our soul in God are a *waste of time*, which only the Savior can redeem.—Everything around us *STRIVES!* Does the grain of wheat, which rots in the earth and in the night, thus see the sun? No, but it has faith. That is why it rises, by and through death, toward the light. So it is with the chosen seeds of all things, save for the unbelieving seeds, where Doubt, its impurities, and its scandals are dormant, and which, being indifferent, die completely. We, we are God's wheat; we feel that we shall rise again in Him—for, according to the enlightened and magnificent words of a theologian, spirits are in Him as bodies are in space.

Passing bell.

Believing, in expectation and in prayer! and one's heart filled with love! that is our doctrine. And even, against all possibility, as we are warned by the Council, should an angel from Heaven come to teach us another, we would persist, firm and unshakable, in our faith.

A pause.

Now, Eve-Sara-Emmanuèle, Princess of Maupers, remember the power of the words sworn before those who represent the Lord, those at whose *BEHEST* the Word becomes flesh. Take freely, then, the final vows that commit your soul.

CHOIR OF NUNS.

Ecce inviolata soror coelestis!

THE ARCHDEACON, *continuing and alternating with the choir.*

... your blood, your being, in this world and in the next,

CHOIR OF NUNS.

Ecce conjux!

Axel

THE ARCHDEACON. . . . your hope, one and infinite.

CHOIR OF NUNS.

Sacra esto!

THE ARCHDEACON. Sara! Your wedding ring is shining on the altar. I tell you that "I love God" means "God loves me"! . . . So love, and *then, do what thou wilt!* cried Saint Augustine. Sara, do you hear them calling you, those voices that are heavenly even now? . . . One word, and I will raise my right hand over your brow in absolution—and consecrated forever to the Light, you shall be wedded in Heaven! Then, before her who has been raised from the dead, the mourning rites—suddenly transformed into a Mass of Thanksgiving, celebrated in golden and festal garments—will come to a close in the joy of the midnight of Good Tidings! And the lilies of your vows shall be tossed by the Angels into the Child's cradle.

The passing bell tolls three times, at closer intervals, then stops.

But . . . the twenty-third ring of this bell, which counts the years of the dead, warns me to leave you alone with your soul during the final moment when you must think of nothing but the irrevocable Judgment.

Having entrusted his crosier to THE CELEBRANT, who is kneeling at his right, he goes up to the tabernacle to take the holy chrism.

CELEBRANT OF THE OFFICE OF THE DEAD, *reciting, in a monotonous voice, Saint Bernard's text for the "Preparation for the Last Judgment":*

Attende, homo quid fuisti ante ortum et quod eris usque ad occasum. Profecto fuit quod non eras. Postea, de vili materia factus, in utero matris de sanguine menstruali nutritus, tunica tua

... And Compel Them to Come In!

fuit pellis secundina. Deinde, in vilissimo panno involutus, progressus es ad nos,—sic indutus et ornatus! Et non memor es quae sit origo tua. Nihil est aliud homo quam sperma foetidum, saccus stercorum, cibus vermium. Scientia, sapientia, ratio, sine Deo Christo, sicut nubes transeunt.

Post hominem vermis: post vermen foetor et horror;

Sic, in non hominem, vertitur omnis homo.

Cur carnem tuam adornas et impinguas, quam, post paucos dies, vermes devoraturi sunt in sepulchro, animam, vero, tuam non adornas,—quae Deo et angelis ejus praesentenda est in Coelis!

Silence.

SISTER ALOYSE and **THE NUNS**, in unison.

*Tuis autem fidelibus, vita mutatur, non tollitur!
Et, dissoluta terrestri domo, coelestis domus comparatur!*

Ring of the gold hand-bell.

SARA uncovers her face, raises herself under the candelabrum, and leans her elbows on the first step of the altar. The opals of the mystic necklace sparkle through the fumes of incense; the carpet round her is strewn with lilies.

She has stood up, amid the censers and candles, facing **THE ARCHDEACON**; she is now standing motionless, her arms folded, her eyes lowered. On her shoulders shine the golden tears of the shroud, which falls in large folds down her back and onto the stones.

RENUNCIATION

~~~~~

THE ARCHDEACON, *coming down to her again and holding the gold oilstock.* On this sublime night the Star of the Three Kings and the shepherds rises also for you!

*He uncovers the holy chrism; the nuns kneel down.*

Answer! Do you accept the Light, the Hope, and the Life?

SARA, *in a grave voice, very distinctly and very gently.* No.

THE ARCHDEACON, *with a shudder, and letting the sacred vessel fall down the altar steps, spilling the holy oil.* Lord God!

*He draws back; his trembling hand grasps the gold staff of his crosier and he leans on it. The nuns, terrified, rush back in confusion, blowing out their candles; the breviaries fall this way and that. The noise of stalls suddenly emptying. All THE NUNS, shivering and wrapping themselves in their large veils, in great haste, surround THE ABBESS, who has stood up and is looking at SARA. Stupor. Silence. SISTER ALOYSE has fallen in a faint at SARA's feet. The baskets of flowers and the censers, still smoking, have been just left where they were.*

SISTER LAUDATION, *inaudibly, and crossing herself.* I now understand! tonight's bad omen: God's lamp went out. . . . Those of the foolish Virgins also went out in the presence of the Bridegroom!

THE ABBESS, *turning pale and as if choking for breath.* O night of terror!

*Midnight strikes. An uproar of joyous bells in the distance. Chimes.*

THE CHOIR OF NUNS, *invisible in the organ loft, bursting forth.*

*Noel! Noel! Alleluia!*

*Hodie contritum est, pede virgineo*

*Caput serpentis antiqui!*



*Annunciation*

~~THE~~ ABBESS, *striking the stones with her crosier. Stop! Stop the singing!*

~~THE~~ CHOIR, *in the organ loft, at the same time, drowning out her voice.*

*Noel! Alleluia! Noel!*

~~THE~~ NUNS, *in the organ loft, have not seen what took place before the altar: and the choirs, to the ringing of bells, exalt the glory of the Nativity. Besides, childless! those chosen girls—  
— the news of a small child, King of the Angels, being born to  
— their mystical tenderness—what could they understand  
— the earth? . . . Oh! Those gentle souls, forever virginal, are beside themselves!*

~~CHOIR~~, *in the organ loft, to the ringing of the proclaiming bells.*

*Adeste, fideles!*

*Laeti, triumphantes!*

*Venite in Bethleem!*

~~THE~~ ABBESS, *with a shout, while the singing continues and interrupting the Alleluias. Silence! . . . Oh! How horrible!*

*The old* CELEBRANT, *terror-stricken, flees from the sanctuary.*

~~THE~~ CHOIR, *wildly singing the joyous carols, to the sound of the organ and the bells.*

*Natum videte, regem Angelorum;*

*Deum infantem, pannis involutum!*

*Venite, adoremus Dominum!*

SISTER LAUDATION *strikes violently with her staff: the hymns suddenly stop; the long serge hangings part, disclosing an empty church and, under the light of the hanging lamps between the pillars, the chairs, benches, and closed portal. At*

*Axel*

*the back, in the lighted organ loft, the singing Sisters, confounded, now silent.*

THE ABBESS, *shouting frantically*. Be quiet! Be quiet!  
*The bells, the organ, and the singing have stopped.*

THE ARCHDEACON, *with a dreadful sigh*. At last!

THE ABBESS, *pointing with her cross, in horror, to the door of the stalls*. Flee! All of you, flee, my daughters! Each of you withdraw to your cell, and there, prostrate and in fervent prayer, beseech the clemency of God! You will not hear Mass tonight.—Sister Calixte, how much do we have in our bursary?

SISTER CALIXTE, *stammering, after a pause*. Three hundred and twenty-three pieces of gold, twelve crowns, and twelve sous from today's collection.

THE ABBESS. Tomorrow you will distribute all of that to the poor.  
*The door of the cloisters opens: the nuns rush out and disappear like shadows.*

*The choir sisters have already left their benches, which rise in tiers round the organs: now, two or three black shapes, probably postulants, come and go in the deserted loft: they put out the candles and close the antiphonaries. Soon, when everything is in darkness, they, too, withdraw. All of them have now gone down into the convent.*

## SCENE VII

SARA, THE ABBESS, THE ARCHDEACON, SISTER LAUDATION,  
SISTER ALOYSE

THE ABBESS *walks down and approaches* THE ARCHDEACON; *then, standing beside him on the steps of the altar, she continues,*

### *Renunciation*

*in a hollow, broken voice, trembling with emotion, and pointing a finger at SARA.*

Father, this is the act of a person possessed. Tomorrow the church must be purified by fire! I am leaving. I feel chilled and confounded. The sacrilege . . . oh! the sacrilege is so great that infinite Mercy alone can obliterate it. Whatever orders you may give as to this baneful girl, our former companion, shall be carried out.

*SISTER LAUDATION, who has remained on her knees next to a pillar, rises and suddenly walks up to SARA.*

*SISTER LAUDATION, enraged and looking at her. Plague-ridden creature! . . .*

*She raises her hand to strike SARA in the face, but suddenly stops, as though mysteriously immobilized. SARA has not even raised her eyes or winced.*

*THE ABBESS. Sister, keep away from this hapless girl and control your indignation in this holy place!*

*SISTER LAUDATION, to herself, thoughtful and withdrawing toward the door of the cloisters. But what sudden uneasiness held back my arm? Why did I not strike?*

*THE ABBESS, in a very low voice, to THE ARCHDEACON. Above all, remember what I warned you of just now: probe that black heart. The secret, Father, the secret!*

*She walks down to SISTER ALOYSE and lifts her in her arms; SISTER ALOYSE regains consciousness.*

*SISTER ALOYSE, in a faint voice, while THE ABBESS leads her away in a state of bewilderment. Farewell, farewell, Sara!*

*THE ABBESS, staggering, has led her to the door of the cloister. They go out. SISTER LAUDATION follows them, after casting a last and sinister glance at SARA.*

*Axel*

*A moment later one hears the door being locked from the outside.*

*SARA and THE ARCHDEACON are alone.*

## SCENE VIII

THE ARCHDEACON, SARA

THE ARCHDEACON, *awesome*. Woman, you have been a coward. You blushed for Him . . . who will blush for you. You have terrified souls as pure as the Morning Star! You have defied the wrath of God and outraged Him who produced you out of nothingness and offered you His kingdom. Your name is Lazarus, and you were deaf to the sovereign voice that cried to you to rise from the tomb. You refused your place at the banquet, and you did so before me, whose mission it is to compel you to sit down at it. For even as laws predispose or oblige man to do his duty, so God, the prime source and end of every law, every duty, and every force, can—miraculously—bend and do violence to man's conscience and freedom.  
*A pause.*

In the name of your salvation, for which, on the eternally mysterious mountain, He gave up the ghost on the inevitable Cross, I want to see you as merely a victim crazed by the princes of Hell. What do you expect? To be evicted from this convent? No, foolish girl, you shall not leave! Today, the jurisdiction of man would protect you in your escape, I know—but you shall not escape. If some lonely secret lies hidden at the bottom of your heart, like a snake in a rock, forget it, for you will find it fruitless—and you will find it fruitless because you are poor, having surrendered all your possessions to the cause of Faith . . . as in one last gesture of divine Inspiration and Grace! No, you shall not take to the road, like a wanderer, casting to the winds, like all mortals, the little that remains of your soul! We, do you understand, are responsible



for that soul. Do you think you are free in our eyes—we, who have taught men to subdue Force and who alone know what Right consists of? What was woman, here below, before the Christians? She was a slave. We emancipated and freed her . . . and you would utter the word freedom in front of us, as if we were not freedom itself! Listen, and weigh my words well: our Justice and our Right do not spring from those of man. It is we who introduced those ruling ideas into their essentially fratricidal minds and kindled them there, for their own salvation. They have forgot it, I know: that is why they now speak as they spoke in the Tower of Babel, unable to agree with one another on the distorted meaning of the Word; that is the punishment for their ancient pride. Our supremacy on earth is the one sanction for each and every law. No one can hold it in check, for a consequence cannot call its primary cause into question or freely examine it, without ceasing itself to be a certainty; and no man, whether prince or slave, can reproach us our sustenance, for he has our own bread in his mouth. We have the Authority: we received it from God, and we shall hold it in our profound hands to the end of time—despite the threats of the future, the illusions of Science, and all the foul fumes from man's brain, that the word may be fulfilled: *Stat Crux dum volvitur orbis*. Let them strike us and forsake us, forget us or hate us, scorn us, torture us, kill us—no matter! All that is vanity! Fruitless rebellion! Strong in our sound and untroubled conscience, we shall be among those whom Saint Ambrose calls *Candidatus martyrum exercitus*! Finally (and this is what matters at this fearful time), we have a Right, and every other right implies its threefold essence: thus the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son! And there is no other original thought, on earth as in Heaven.

Therefore, Sara, since by a miracle I am given the power of efficient and salutary action, I shall resort to Force, in the



name of God, and use it against you, to save you from your frightful nature. You will return to the darkened cell! There you will fast until your wretched and rebellious flesh be humbled. Your beauty is a bit of Hell made visible: Your hair tempts you! Your eyes are flashes of scandal! All that must rapidly burn out and become as dust; for it is an illusion of the external darkness where everything is transformed and obliterated . . . I take the earthworm to witness. You could not see yourself as you are at this moment without dying. . . . Do you think that Magdalen was any less lovely? Be assured that from the moment she recognized herself, as the eye of God shined down upon her, the sublime sinner shuddered with horror for the rest of her life. Pray, as she prayed, for that which illumines us! May you follow her example to the end of your days! And you shall be our sister, our saint, our child!

*A pause.*

One day, perhaps, if your repentance is sincere, you will come back to us. I doubt it; but it is my duty to hope so . . . for divine Mercy and Love are boundless. Until then we shall pray for you, day and night, with consternation, tears, and fasting! I myself, when pronouncing the formula of exorcism, will put on the hair shirt for your sake.

*He walks down. SARA, impervious, has not reacted at all, nor looked up.*

But—I have just had an inspiration direct from Heaven! Under this stone, among the Angels, lies the saint who founded this ancient abbey, the blessed Apollodora. This burial vault, the proximity of these miraculous relics, is the *in-pace* that suits you. There, the very gentle Apollodora will intercede for you, at your side, during your waking and sleeping hours, sanctifying your bread and your water, if you are still within her remembrance.

*He slides the two bolts of the huge tombstone with the end of*

## Renunciation

*his heavy crosier and then slips it into the ring. Yielding to the priest's pressure, the stone rises, disclosing the wide earthen steps of a sepulchral pit: the large stone, upright, stands open on its hinges.*

Here is the gate . . . the *janua* . . . through which I have the right to compel you to enter into Life; for as Saint Ignatius of Loyola so profoundly remarked: "the end justifies the means," and it is written: "Compel them to come in! . . ." Come, my darling daughter! my beloved daughter! Go down into the vault. May you be joyful! It is the alms you have given us that no doubt won you this last grace: make the most of it. Bless your ordeal, then, that it may be a satisfaction to you, and in turn . . .

*Humbly, he bows to her.*

Pray for me!

*At last SARA raises her eyes to the priest. She looks at the open tomb next to her. Silent and expressionless, she walks over to a pillar. From among the ex-votos hung, in gratitude, by sailors, she grabs an old double ax: then comes back, slowly and coldly as before. Once she is near the gaping hole, she simply points her finger at the pit and motions vaguely but imperiously to the old priest to descend into the tomb himself.*

Confounded, THE ARCHDEACON shrinks back. Sara moves toward him, this time with the ax raised and flashing! The old man looks round him, then looks at her. He realizes he is alone: one word from him and the deadly weapon, held in that calm and rebellious young fist, would probably crash down like lightning. He smiles with a kind of bitter pity, shrugs his shoulders sadly—and as if to prevent a more horrible crime, he obeys, under SARA's cold glance.

He makes a sweeping sign of the cross and goes down the steps, knocking against them with his crosier and dragging his long black cope behind him; gradually his head and gold miter sink down and vanish from sight.

*Axel*

THE ARCHDEACON'S VOICE, *from the underground vault.*

*In te, Domine, speravi: non confundar in aeternum.*

## SCENE IX

SARA

*Alone.*

SARA *throws the ax aside, in one motion drops the stone back into place, and impassively pushes each bolt with the tip of her sandal.*

*That done, she walks over to the window and jolts the rope attached to it; the window bursts wide open. A gust of snow and night wind sweeps through the church and puts out the candles.*

*In the darkness SARA then rips the shroud in two and securely knots both halves together. Directly after, throwing a pilgrim's frock over her festal garments, and standing on the abbatial chair, she reaches one of the iron bars with a neat and vigorous bound, grasps it with one hand, and pulls herself up onto the window ledge.*

*Then she slides between the bars onto the outer ledge and looks outside, down below, into space, far off, into infinity.*

*Outside, the night seems fearful, gloomy, starless. The wind blows and roars. Snow is falling.*

SARA *turns round, attaches the twisted and torn sheet to one of the bars, tests the knot with a good pull, and covers her head with the gray hood of her frock—then she bends over, drops down, and disappears—outside, hanging—into the wet, freezing night, silently.*

PART TWO

---

THE WORLD OF TRAGEDY

---

... *quia nominor leo.*

PHAEDRUS

## KEEPERS OF THE SUPREME SECRET

---

*A great hall with a high oaken ceiling; an iron chandelier hangs from the center of the intersecting beams. At the back, a large main door opening onto a vestibule. Over the door, the Auersperg coat of arms supported by its large golden sphinxes.*

*To the left, a large Gothic window, disclosing vast, misty forests on the horizon.*

*To the right, a stone stairway built into the wall; at the top of the stairway, an arched door leading to one of the towers.*

*Twilight, already quite dark.*

*The depth of the hall is such that it suggests a gigantic structure dating back to the very early Middle Ages. To the right, a huge fireplace with a blazing fire that lights up the stage. On the wide mantelpiece is a pile of dusty folios. Set out on adjoining black wooden workbenches are alembics, astral globes, ancient clay lamps, enormous bones from extinct species of animals, and dried herbs.*

*On the walls, trophies of ancient weapons, Eastern oriflammes—and very old portraits of the chatelaines and great barons of Germany. Nailed between Saracen suits of armor are huge vultures and large wild eagles with outspread wings.*

*Downstage, doors to the right and to the left, hung with high-warp tapestries.*

*In the center of the hall, a table laid for a feast; skins of foxes and black bears are thrown at the feet of two antiquated chairs, placed at either end of the table, facing one another.*

*A tall old man, sitting near the fireplace, examines the weapons he has just polished. He is dressed in a surcoat of brown wool, belted in leather, and an old pair of cavalry breeches of the same material and shade as the surcoat. He is wearing the Prussian beret over his thin gray hair, cut short, in a stubble. He wears the Iron Cross on his chest.*



SCENE I

MIKLAUS

*Alone.*

There! All these rifles and hunting knives are gleaming, the flask is full of kirsch: look out, wolves!

*He gets up and looks round.*

Ah! Evening already.

*He walks over to the window and looks into the distance.*

How it's blowing out there in the fir trees! The heather is bending; the bats are not flying; sure sign of a storm. Better close the window tightly; the smell of trees, wholesome during the day, is unhealthy at night—especially when spring is almost upon us.

SCENE II

MIKLAUS, *then* HARTWIG and GOTTHOLD

*The two old men enter from the left. They have the same build as MIKLAUS, are still wearing almost military dress, and are rather noble in appearance; they, too, wear the Iron Cross.*

GOTTHOLD. Miklaus, it is time to light the torches for the feast.

MIKLAUS, *walking back and rubbing his hands together.* And the fire, too, for the last winter winds are chilling!

*He walks over to the fireplace and pokes up the fire.*

So the doctor will still not come down to supper?

HARTWIG, *shivering.* No.—Brr! Don't spare the vines; it's got to blaze! Oh! How the stones here drip with dampness! I should say that the other wing of the castle isn't quite so bleak. How

*Axel*

cold it is here; and how curious that it's rather warm outside and getting close—always a sign that a bad storm is threatening.

GOTTHOLD, *shivering also and looking round him.* That's because the wind blows through the ivy growing on the granite outside. Yes, the room is absolutely freezing.

MIKLAUS, *piling huge logs in the hearth.* Also, why is it never used except on formal occasions? Master Janus is the only one who comes here now and then. . . .

GOTTHOLD *lights the candelabra;* MIKLAUS, *as he stands up, gazes at the reflection of the lights on the walls, the woodwork, and the tarnished crescents of the standards.—And the flame-blue of the long swords, scimitars, and daggers, the eyes of the birds of prey, the gilt corners of the frames, and the barrels of the harquebuses and rifles throw sparkles of light that animate the faces in the old portraits.*

What dilapidation! Just look at the paintings! The harsh features of the Margraves and the fine brows of my lord Axel's ancestors are worn away; the tapestries have faded.

HARTWIG. And this bronze armor, all inlaid with gold, won during the first Crusade by Prince Elcias of Auersperg, a knight of Germany, from the Saracen Emir Saharil I, look how it's all eaten away by rust and how the dead wood of the lance has broken under the mold.

MIKLAUS, *grave.* Ah! I'm not a bit anxious to polish them; this place is haunted!

*The three veterans, now standing round the white cloth and the lights, are illuminated against the dark background of shadows cast by the arches of the hall. They are energetic, worried-looking figures; their great age and sedentary occupations in the castle have not yet dimmed the firmness of their eyes. A*

### *Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

~~A~~ dreadful scar marks GOTTHOLD's face from top to bottom; the ~~left~~ sleeve of HARTWIG's military jacket is sewn onto his chest; MIKLAUS' forehead, at the right, has been gouged by a bullet.

And all around them, in fact, in the very air of the hall, there is an overwhelming impression of extraordinary solemnity; they are no doubt affected by it but try to put it out of their minds; it heightens their words and their silences.

GOTTHOLD, to MIKLAUS. Do you know that the Commander is leaving us? His servant Otto set out this very morning with his master's traveling gear . . . and it's a long way from here to the Prussian border!

MIKLAUS. What! The brilliant lord is returning without having even seen Doctor Janus?


GOTTHOLD. Yes. The farewell feast is tonight. Help me arrange these pretty bunches of rosemary and this armful of verbena, wild roses, and mint in between the candelabra: flowers give a festive look. Then this basket of fruit; the best fruit of all: the birds have pecked at it. Our visitor is a connoisseur.

HARTWIG, to himself. A strange visitor, one who doesn't want to see anything!

GOTTHOLD, suspiciously. Hmm! . . . and yet who sees everything.

HARTWIG, looking at him. Ah! That's true: so you, too . . . you . . .

GOTTHOLD, singing softly.

A red beard and black hair,  
 Trust them not, that evil pair.

MIKLAUS, looking at them. You and Hartwig both seem delighted that he's leaving?

*Axel*

GOTTHOLD, *indifferent*. Merely a man going away.

HARTWIG, *muttering*. A pale man is a harmful man!

GOTTHOLD, *in a low voice*. Ours is ashen as silver! He is the color of Judas.

HARTWIG, *after a moment, to GOTTHOLD*. Such a fox cannot have good fur—as we students used to say in Heidelberg . . . long ago.

*All three sit down round the fire, which is now ablaze and flaming.*

MIKLAUS. Yet the young master seems to enjoy his company:—is he not a kinsman? The late Count of Auersperg once presented him at Court. . . .

GOTTHOLD, *poking the fire*. Yes, Count Axel's father brought him out of obscurity, and obligated as he was, over the past twenty years he showed no interest at all in the child. It took this question of an inheritance and benefits to remind him, out there at the Prussian Court, that his cousin, Count Axel of Auersperg, a German prince—and what's more, head of the eldest branch of the family—was living alone, with very old retainers, in a fortified castle in ruins, buried in the heart of the vast Black Forest. Then, of course, how he managed to find guides! and to sleep in tiny cottages! and to ride for days over steep roads, through fresh clearings, over mountainous paths!

HARTWIG, *worried*. Yes, Gotthold, you're right: the man is not a friend. I shall always remember the day he arrived, last week—was it not on the eve of Palm Sunday?—when suddenly, after having made his way through all the empty halls of the castle, led by Herr Zacharias, there he was—all plastered over



### *Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

with decorations and medals—and face to face with the young Count—well, instead of holding out both hands, he stood there nonplused for a moment! The three of us, old fogeys, our breastplates rusty, veterans of the old wars, retainers today, doomed to exile, but who, I suspect, won our Iron Crosses, each of us, with a bit more difficulty than he won his fine ribbons (no offense, mind you), he never even acknowledged our presence.

**GOTTHOLD**, *thoughtful*. The Count, dressed in mourning, which suits his powerful build so well, rising and greeting him with his grave simplicity, seemed like a young lion who wears his breed in his eyes. I was proud of him, I was! just like the day I had the honor of putting a foil in his hand for the first time. And I should think that today my lord is surely one of the most dangerous swordsmen in Germany, if not the most formidable.

**HARTWIG**, *looking up and smiling*. And Ukko, by the way, was not much of a courtier either when he met our traveler. The artless devil! Do you remember how, in one hand, he held on a leash his three ferocious greyhounds, growling at the sight of the stranger—and how he smiled as he bowed? And how, in a very low voice, he asked the master whether he ought to let them loose at his unexpected kinsman?

**GOTTHOLD**. Ha ha! The rogue!

**HARTWIG**. He's the joy of the burg, that gay page of olden times: and what's more, he already has a solid, subtle, and amazing mind. And he seems like an ever-flashing spark!

**GOTTHOLD**. And he's nimble as a shadow.

**MCCLAUS**, *pouting like an old man*. He's a wicked little charmer who plays too many tricks on me.

*Axel*

GOTTHOLD, *smiling*. Good old Miklaus! There now, let us warm our last daydreams at the flame of his splendid youth, just as we warm our three white beards at this good bright fire. Let him play—even with us; his mischievous smile puts new life into us and the sight of him does us good.

MIKLAUS. Well, all right! all right!

*Poking the fire.*

But to get back to the point, you surprise me, both of you, when you imply that my lord feels no friendship for his cousin. Yet from the very first meal, the ancient silver was unearthed and the best corners of the wine cellar explored.

GOTTHOLD. What does that prove? The Count is doing his duty as a host, that's all.

MIKLAUS. However, Herr Zacharias . . .

HARTWIG, *turning toward him*. Yes, after all, what does the old steward say about it? He's a real ferret—and he's a financier worthy of the days when every nobleman had his own goldsmith. I doubt he has been taken in by the Commander in the reckoning up of the inheritance.

MIKLAUS. Precisely! Herr Zacharias has a very high and very favorable opinion of him!

HARTWIG, *amazed, to GOTTHOLD*. Can age have weakened his mind in the end?

GOTTHOLD, *thoughtful*. What Miklaus says does not surprise me: I have noticed that since the arrival of our distinguished guest, Herr Zacharias has been worried, reserved . . . I don't know . . . he prowls about; he's troubled.

*Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

HARTWIG. He has something on his mind.

GOTTHOLD, *in a lower voice*. And, besides, he knows the age-old family secrets . . . not to mention . . . the FRIGHTFUL one.

MIKLAUS and HARTWIG, *together*. Shh, Gotthold!

*The three old men look around with a kind of mysterious uneasiness.*

GOTTHOLD *shudders and, with his heavy hobnailed shoe, violently kicks the glowing logs, which suddenly cast a shower of flames and sparks into the hall.*

MIKLAUS, *after a moment, picking up the conversation*. To conclude—I, for one, hold that Count Axel is in no way bored with his guest. Why! at one supper he drinks more wine with him than he previously drank at a dozen meals: I even think he's developing a taste for it—and I am delighted!

GOTTHOLD, *raising his head*. Good Miklaus, you should know the young master better than that.

HARTWIG. A young man so sober as to fast for days at a time!

GOTTHOLD. A young man who denies himself all the joys of his youth! who is spending his best years sitting up—night after night!—in the tower, under a reading lamp, poring over ancient manuscripts, in the company of the doctor!

HARTWIG, *to MIKLAUS*. Don't you understand that he proposes toasts only out of courtesy? A lord of the manor must honor his guest, and he shows him deference.

MIKLAUS. Yes, yes! Anything you say . . . But I tell you he has been amusing himself this whole last week. Look here, those hunting parties with the Commander . . .

*Axel*

HARTWIG. Nonsense! It's a way for him to be alone. Have you forgotten that he likes silence above all? If now and then he accepts Ukko's company, it's only because the child beside him becomes more silent than his shadow, and he well knows that his vigilant scout, with those hawk eyes, loves him so well as to die for him!—With anyone else, he breaks into a gallop on his stallion Wunder and he's soon out of sight, jumping over ravines and thickets. Gunther and Job, his two somewhat younger grooms, gave up trying to follow him long ago—and the Commander of Auersperg almost always returns to the castle half an hour after he's left it.

MIKLAUS, *musings*. Really? Ah? . . . That's another story! I thought his cousin was helping him a bit these days in those dangerous battues. . . .

HARTWIG, *smiling*. Axel of Auersperg needs no one's help when he wants to exterminate wild boars or bears or eagles:

*Pointing to the walls.*

Look.—The danger involved! By Saint Wilhelm! You know perfectly well that our young lord is strong enough to choke a wolf with one clutch at his throat, never deigning to use his hunting knife.

*In a lower voice.*

As for anything that might threaten him from a distance—the twenty thousand foresters of the Schwarzwald, the miners, the clog-makers, the woodcutters, the old soldiers—all of them! are more devoted to him than to the King.

MIKLAUS, *considering*. Actually—actually, you might be right! Besides, it is rather surprising that he never even asked Master Janus, so far as I know, to take a moment off from his work and his solitude to come and look over the visitor.

GOTTHOLD, *after a pause*. Oh! The doctor has a way of knowing people without seeing them.



*Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

**MEKLAUS**, *looking at him*. Eh?

**GOTTHOLD**. He can perceive them and guess what they're about from the mere sound of the voices of those who talk about them.

**HARTWIG**, *putting his hand on GOTTHOLD's shoulder and laughing*. Come now! You can't be saying that Master Janus is a sorcerer, Gotthold?

**GOTTHOLD**, *grave*. I know what I mean. If the doctor has not appeared, it is because the Commander presents no interest, is hardly worth looking at, and is, in short, of little consequence.

*A pause.*

Apropos . . . have you noticed, Hartwig, that Master Janus doesn't age? Yet he has been here many years!

**HARTWIG**. Upon my word, that's true!

*Laughing.*

Perhaps star-gazing keeps one from aging.

*A pause. There is no sound in the high-ceilinged hall but the crackling of the fire.*

**GOTTHOLD**, *in a strange voice*. Frankly, I find that his eyes don't seem to belong to a man of this century.

**HARTWIG**, *with a forced laugh*. Good old Gotthold is trying to frighten us now!

**MEKLAUS**, *lowering his voice, and in a confidential tone*. I admit there is something about him, that Master Janus, which discourages affection. His way of doing good is chilling to those who are obligated to him. He has often cured us, Gotthold—us and the peasants on the edge of the Great Woods: but

nothing avails. One is never at ease with him! For almost twelve years I have served him every day, it's strange . . . but I cannot get used to . . . even believing that he sees me.

HARTWIG, *musings, and also in a low voice*. But have we ourselves ever really looked at him? When he appears, he surprises us as a stranger. On the rare occasions when he speaks, what he says, although always simple, seems like the reflection between two mirrors: one would lose oneself in the infinite images. Look! The best thing is not to think too much about the doctor—if we mean to keep our wits about us till we die.

GOTTHOLD, *grave, in the same tone*. He is inscrutable by nature. Even daily contact with him never dispels that impression. —When he arrived alone, on horseback, the very day of Gerhard of Auersperg's most unexpected death, at the end of the wars against mysterious Napoleon—it was at dawn. When he was shown the will in which the Count (who, it would seem, had known Master Janus on the battlefields) entrusted him with the care of his son—I watched him; he appeared to be already acquainted with the fact of his death and with his last will and testament.

*For some minutes now, the clouds have been gathering outside, and strong gusts of wind indicate that a storm is threatening. Five o'clock strikes.*

HARTWIG. Listen: This is the hour at which, twenty years ago, our beautiful and revered Countess Lisvia of Auersperg—always pensive and so grave!—would come down to the chapel organ, like the chatelaines of the past.

GOTTHOLD, *to MIKLAUS*. You know that casement window in the large gallery, where the sun sets every evening? She would often stop there for long hours, leaning on her elbows, wan,

*Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

dressed in mourning, looking like an angel, her Book of Hours, with its enameled clasps, on her knees.

MEKLAUS, GOTTHOLD, and HARTWIG, *rising and removing their berets*. May the souls of the dead of this house be with God! *They sit down again. A pause; there is the sound of falling rain outside.*

HARTWIG. Come, now, throw some pine cones into the hearth and let's stop looking back to the past. The years are breezes, and we are the leaves they blow away.

GOTTHOLD. All the same, when Axel of Auersperg breaks the silence at some solemn moment, the sound that rings out will, I think, be harsh.

MEKLAUS, *shaking his head*. Strong winds bang strong doors!

GOTTHOLD, *almost to himself*. Ah! Because it was *always* in his nature to become . . . superhuman. *The sound of thunder; flashes of lightning; a distant murmur of the woods.*

MEKLAUS, *rising and going over to a window*. But—what weather! . . . The sky changed while we were reminiscing! The gale is shaking the mountain. Fortunately, the keep is still secure.

GOTTHOLD, *standing and also looking into the distance*. True. The horizon is already blue with lightning. And just look at the fir trees: how the flashes set them off in relief! *They listen to the storm.*

HARTWIG. And from here we can hear the branches cracking. What a downpour! Fortunately, the cannon on the battlements are covered and well oiled.

*Axel*

MIKLAUS. How the gusts lash against our old windows! It's getting worse than ever. We shall have no moon tonight. Wretched weather! The Commander probably won't be able to bring himself to leave tonight.

GOTTHOLD, *worried*. Torrents of rain are coming through the trees. And my lord not yet back from the hunt! If only he's taken his leather jerkin!

*An enormous blue-violet flash streaks the shadows of the hall.*

MIKLAUS. Ah! Now the thunder!

GOTTHOLD. Yes, a sad and hideous flash.

MIKLAUS. I thought I saw Hell glance at us!

HARTWIG, *after the loud thunderclap*. And this is the day before Easter!

### SCENE III

THE SAME, UKKO

UKKO, *breathless, enters from the left, a hunting horn on his shoulder, dressed in a black cloth tunic with a wide leather belt ringed with iron, two eagle's feathers in his fur cap, and a spear in his hand.*

UKKO. Good evening, forefathers!

*He leans his spear in an angle of the wall and approaches.*

GOTTHOLD, MIKLAUS, and HARTWIG, *turning round*. Ukko!

UKKO, *joyful*. Are all three of you contemplating the admirable order of the seasons?



*Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

GOTTHOLD. You've quit the hunt? Where did you leave my lord?

UKKO. In a cave three miles from here, now and then watching the storm come on.

HARTWIG. And how was the day?

UKKO. A big lynx, a she-wolf and her litter, two foxes, and a vulture. The vulture was way up in the black thunder clouds when the master's bullet took it by surprise. I'm the one who killed the two foxes. But . . . there's something else . . . and I want . . .

MIKLAUS. Drink this glass of Rhine wine and come warm yourself up, you ugly little gnome.

UKKO, *drinking*. Thanks. I'm not cold.—I must tell you . . .

HARTWIG, *feeling his sleeve*. What? Nothing underneath? He'd forgotten his surcoat! . . . He's as wet as the grass.

UKKO. It's nothing.—Now, for your information . . .

MIKLAUS. Come on, stand over here: you'll be sick; better get warm.

UKKO. Never mind, I tell you!—Just imagine . . .

HARTWIG, *worried*. Could something have happened to the Count?

UKKO. No! Since I'm here!—Ah! If you only knew . . .

MIKLAUS, *to GOTTHOLD*. I find the child completely changed since yesterday, don't you? You're so pale, Ukko.

UKKO *folds his arms and looks at them*.

*Axel*

HARTWIG. Speak up. You worry us.

UKKO, *impatiently stamping his foot*. By all the gods!

HARTWIG *and* MIKLAUS, *to* GOTTHOLD, *who, without a word, has sat down by the fire*. Be quiet, Gotthold.

To UKKO.

We're listening.

UKKO, *beginning his tale*. Last evening . . .

MIKLAUS, *under his breath*. How it's thundering, eh? Do you hear it?

UKKO, *furious*. Ah! So you really won't listen to me? . . . Very well. I'm leaving!—These hundred-year-old chatterboxes, there's nothing like them on earth!

GOTTHOLD. Silence! The children have the floor!

UKKO, *still furious*. What! The three of you will soon be three centuries old between you—you've heard thousands of storms, thunderclaps, north winds, and the din of dreadful battles, and you pay attention to a nasty little squall . . . when I want to tell you a story? . . .

GOTTHOLD. There, now, foolish boy!

HARTWIG. Gently, gently!

UKKO, *still furious*. But I, just myself, am seventeen years old, still I don't care a rap for lightning or wind, or rain, or all the rest of it!

MIKLAUS. That's enough now. Tell us, clearly . . .

*Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

TEKKO. No. I'd rather leave. You will never know. And that's that.

GOTTHOLD. Are you going to talk now it's your turn, you mischievous little devil? What is happening?

TEKKO. Miklaus and Hartwig will interrupt me again . . . and besides . . . Anyway, no; you don't like me. . . .

HARTWIG, *smiling*. You wicked little imp!

TEKKO. You're not interested in what happens to me.

MIKLAUS. Tell us calmly . . .

TEKKO. Goodbye.

*TEKKO takes a few steps as if to leave; the three old men rush over and bring him back, half smiling, half angry.*

*Then, standing up, by the flowers on the table, lit by the candleabra and also by the glimmering fire and violet flashes of lightning, he considers, dark and glowing, while the three men, seated round him, listen with a kind of anxiety.*

*Smiling, he speaks as if lost in a dream—while harps far in the distance seem to accompany him, from the depths of the dream.*

Yesterday, in the Forest, when the first star came out, I met a pretty little fairy, oh! a thousand times prettier than all the fairies in the Harz! . . . a young girl. She was singing in a voice as fresh as a bubbling spring, and with a little basket of wild cherries swinging from one hand, she walked under the fir trees. Her two dark braids, which hung down her back, she had tied, with primroses, to the waist of her velvet bodice. Now and then she would pat a large white

*Axel*

spaniel which jumped round her joyfully! Oh! How pretty she was! Her eyes were gentle as the evening!

MIKLAUS, *smiling*. Ah ha! Young Ukko has already . . .

GOTTHOLD *puts a hand over his mouth*.

UKKO. For some time, hidden in the long glade, I followed her. Suddenly I brushed aside the brambles and went up to her. Our eyes had hardly met when we exchanged friendly smiles. Yet we had never seen each other. We held hands without thinking. Her white-furred companion looked at me intently; he, too, seemed to recognize me: and almost at once, he and Holf, my big greyhound, were old friends. She and I, side by side, walked silently down the path that leads to the torrent where the oaks begin. There her father, the forest ranger Hans Gluck, has his cottage. I went in. He raised his eyes, and once he had looked at us carefully, he held out his hand to me and welcomed me to his home.—Luisa put two glasses on the white cloth. Ah! That good clear kirsch she knows so well how to prepare! While we chatted, she poured it out for us with her gentle hand. . . . When, at last, night had fallen, as she was saying goodbye to me on the doorstep, I slipped my sacred family ring on her finger. . . . Silently, she kissed my brow: her eyes were solemn, and two beautiful tears fell from her lashes onto my eyelids. . . . I fled! I was so happy that I began to weep in the woods. I was choking! Holf barked and joyfully tried to pull me back toward the cottage. . . . Ah! Luisa Gluck! Her kiss was heaven—and fire: I have such delicious desire for her in my soul that I can't breathe, I'm so in love with her, and I love her so much! We shall be married in the fall: at the latest! I'm . . . I'm happy! Only, if one of you three lets himself die before the wedding—ah! . . . I shall be angry!



*Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

GOTTHOLD. I'll be your best man, Ukko.

UKKO, *laughing and pulling GOTTHOLD's long beard*. Thank you, a thousand and a thousand thanks!

*Pointing to MIKLAUS and HARTWIG*.

And here are a couple of godfathers. . . .

HARTWIG. What! But I've known her from birth . . . the day before yesterday, your little Luisa!

UKKO, *musingly and looking at him*. The day before yesterday? As a matter of fact, that's right. For ordinary people, it comes to sixteen and a half years.

HARTWIG, *under his breath*. Already!

UKKO. Some say: "Already!" The others say: "At last!" I'm beginning to think they're the same word in reverse.

MIKLAUS, *laughing*. I find it strange that father Gluck—a good Saxon soldier, by the way—should give you his daughter, my friend.

UKKO, *putting a hand on his shoulder*. You're really quite lucky to still find things strange, at your age.

HARTWIG. This time Miklaus isn't wrong: you are good-looking, but you're a shade.

UKKO. My good Hartwig, do you suffer from the shade of your left arm when the weather changes?

HARTWIG. Yes. Why is that, my son?

*Axel*

UKKO, *merry*. Ah! Ask the cannonball that took away its reality in Lutzen. I only wanted to make you realize that a shade is something.

GOTTHOLD. The child is right to be happy, and as early as possible! You are sorrowful souls.—But, listen! I hear . . . what?—those steps . . .

MIKLAUS. Yes; in the knights' gallery.

HARTWIG. I think it is our guest. Quick, more logs on the fire, Miklaus!

UKKO. And since I see no reason for displaying respectful joy at the sight of him, a word of greeting and let's leave him.

GOTTHOLD. Yes, indeed, it is he.

UKKO, *gathering all three of them together, mysteriously*.

Listen: The future grandfather of your godsons made me a present this morning of a jar of pink kirsch, more precious than the King's. My friends, I invite you to have a taste of it with me in the armory. There we shall be at home. And while awaiting the master, our good Axel, gentleman of the woods, prince of his mountain, and lord of the torrents—oh! I want to drink with you to Luisa Gluck, my betrothed!

MIKLAUS, GOTTHOLD, *and* HARTWIG, *each with a finger to his lips*. Shh.

KASPAR OF AUERSPERG *enters from the right. Looks like a great nobleman. About forty-three years old. Black cloth traveling costume, with a short hooded cape. Very elegant bearing. Tall. Insignia of orders on his chest.*

SCENE IV

THE SAME, COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG

THE COMMANDER, *to himself, looking at them.* No. Not those. They're stones—and the child is the tool of his master. The other, the steward, that Herr Zacharias—he's the one to tackle.

UKKO. If the Commander of Auersperg wishes to await my lord here, he is welcome to the Cape wine, the tobacco canister, the fire, and the books.

THE COMMANDER. Is the Count expected back soon?

UKKO. In an hour, at the latest.

UKKO *and the three old soldiers salute and leave. The storm now seems to have subsided: there are long intervals between the thunder, and in the distance the rain has almost stopped; yet through the windows the sky still looks overcast and threatening.*

SCENE V

COMMANDER KASPAR OF AUERSPERG

*Alone.*

What magnificent old men! They remind one of a fine battlefield, a fine winter, and a fine death.

*Looking round him.*

What an owl's nest! Books, he said. Probably ancient history. Let's see.

*He opens a folio.*

Nothing against the wine; it's almost as old as the men

who bottled it; still, its marvelous vintage can take all those years without weakening.

*Reading:*

"Treatise on Secondary Causes."

*He laughs.*

Ha! What a first-rate title! . . . "Treatise on Secondary Causes"! I find such jargon really crystal clear! . . . Ah! Ah! Let's go on a bit.

*Reading once more:*

*Procul a delubro mulier semper!*

That epigraph is hardly the last word in gallantry.

*Reading again:*

Chapter One: "The Silentiaries." Heavens! "Every word, in the circle of its action, creates what it expresses. Weigh, then, the will you grant the fictions of your mind."

*Closing the book and throwing it on top of the others.*

Bosh!

*He yawns. Then, musing, after having glanced at the objects around him.*

The worst has happened; I've no longer any doubt of it.—My young lord of the manor really and truly has a taste for Hermetic philosophy, the cabala, and witches' tales! It is Master Janus, beyond a doubt, who inspires him and instills those dimwit superstitions into his mind—superstitions that will long be Germany's vice. Their conversations must run on about the Vehmgericht and . . . the Rosicrucians? Actually, there were some in our family: but . . . when it was fashionable.—I now see very well why that dismal madman did not deem it suitable to show his face to my profane eyes. With two or three good gibes, I should have beautifully demolished him.

*A pause. He sits down near the table and pours himself some wine.*

I confess that this manor, including its inhabitants, seems



### *Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

to me improbable. I find that I'm paradoxical in the place. Here they are three centuries behind the times, by the clock. I thought I was living at the dawn of the nineteenth century? What a mistake! . . . As I crossed the threshold, I realized that I was living under the Emperor Henry, at the time of the Wars of Investiture.

All right. To the health of the aforesaid Emperor!

*He drinks.*

Now then, I should like to understand this abnormal existence they all lead here. As for my noble cousin, I feel but a rather tepid sympathy for him—that young hero of another age. He really has one of the most . . . undefinable characters. Oh well, a man of around forty who is interested in anyone but himself does not deserve to live.

*A pause.*

But, let's see: He is a most handsome gentleman, I must admit, although he has a somewhat foredoomed face. He even has a superbly imposing presence, being so tall, and does not lack a sort of wild distinction . . . which would be supremely effective at Court, where they dote on anything new. I can imagine the Queen's musicians, the night of his presentation—the Princess of Sabelsberg, the Countess of Walstein—ah! ha! A burning success at first sight! or I am strangely deluding myself.—He knew how to welcome me with perfect courtesy and proved himself a nobleman by giving up part of his inheritance to me, despite his lost riches. . . . I am certain that Count Axel of Auersperg, if well managed, could win me some influence with the King . . . influence that would be considerably useful to me: that old business of his father and the Treasuries is so completely forgotten!

*After a pause.*

Oh! That old ambition of mine, which is still not fulfilled!

*Solemn and looking around him.*

There's another witch, ambition.

*His eyes stop at the table.*

Here is my farewell supper. A table that delights the eye! Those pretty forest flowers . . . It could not be better and is in very good taste.

*Silence.*

The strange air one breathes here! This old dwelling gives me an impression of the unknown.—Let's see; I think I have gained some ascendancy over my young cousin: actually, people with that sort of nature are weak as children. I have a twenty-year lead on him, which, combined with the fact that I am a kinsman, puts me enough at ease so that I could quickly become intimate and seem protective in our conversations. In short, I could talk in an apparently nonchalant way, but with the kind of well-calculated spontaneity which, given a slight change in degree, makes even impertinence acceptable. . . . Tonight I must try to combat the influence of that Master Janus. When dessert is served, I mean to show him that finding the philosopher's stone means making one's way in the world and taking, by will or by force, whatever place in it one wishes.

*Thoughtful.*

As if all the fantasies of the earth and all the maxims of the philosophers were, in fact, worth one glance from a pretty woman! And youth, alas! beautiful youth! That is true magic! A beautiful creature—that, one understands immediately! effortlessly! . . . That's clear!

*He looks at the crystal of his glass against the light of the torches.*

I am apt to think that the whole dismal proximity of these woods, torrents, and valleys, intensified by solitude, has fostered those absurd notions in his mind. . . . Bah! It would take no more than a week out there to cure the disease . . . and I am certain that, in my hands, the young man would become a most useful instrument.

*He stands up and paces.*

## *Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

All the same, I am worried. It is not natural for a boy, who clearly hasn't a common mind, to deliberately agree to lead the bear-like existence of Count Axel of Auersperg! Even an overwhelming passion for the occult sciences would not justify such seclusion—such a long, distant, and voluntary exile. There is something else.

*Lowering his voice and in a strangely musing tone, after already glancing round the hall.*

There is something *here*.

*Considering and looking absently at the distant flashes of lightning.*

I have now spent a long week in this forgotten, embattled, antiquated den. Its architecture, the surroundings, and the silence would interest no one today but useless philosophers; of course, I should not have bored myself here for so long had it not been for that obscure and persistent impression of something strangely unexplained! Since it has not yet worn off, it must be serious, and . . . I don't at all like to draw a blank. Indeed, I should very much wish to clear up the mystery.—To question Herr Zacharias would have been rather unwise up to now; but since I am happily leaving this unsettling place today, I can soon, when the old stew-  
and . . .

*Seeing HERR ZACHARIAS enter.*

Here he is.

## SCENE VI

COMMANDER KASPAR OF AUERSPERG, HERR ZACHARIAS

~~HERR~~ ZACHARIAS, *on the threshold, looking at* THE COMMANDER.

The time has come. My duty is to speak.

*He cautiously shuts the doors.*

~~THE~~ COMMANDER, *watching him, and to himself.* If that one is

*Axel*

also a sorcerer, the Devil is clearly in no hurry to take him.  
*Looking him up and down.*

Now then! but . . . he is a hundred years old, that boy! Let's study his remains a bit: tight-lipped, with expressionless, diplomatic eyes . . . yes, but not an acute nose. Good.  
*In a louder voice.*

Good evening, Herr Zacharias! Is anything wrong? By my comfit box! You seem upset.

HERR ZACHARIAS, *grave, walking over to* THE COMMANDER. My lord, I had the honor of meeting you more than once, some twenty years ago. You were a friend of the late Count's; you must love his son.

THE COMMANDER, *to himself*. Devotion is his weak point.  
*In a louder voice.*

He is a young man of great promise, and I should make every sacrifice to be sure he takes his rightful place in the world.

HERR ZACHARIAS. Since your arrival, my lord, I have been deliberating night and day. The moments of my life are numbered; your presence here is an altogether unhopèd-for opportunity which I must seize.

THE COMMANDER. My presence here?

HERR ZACHARIAS, *preoccupied*. Yes. I have a most amazing thing to divulge to you. Something . . . Oh! the strangest of all things! If you want to hear about it, I must hurry: it is a difficult tale to tell . . . time is running short and—you are leaving tonight.

THE COMMANDER. You are too solemn to be serious, Herr Zacharias.



## *Keepers of the Supreme Secret*

**HERR ZACHARIAS.** My lord, I never speak without carefully weighing every word I use. And it is truly impossible to find the precise words to describe the facts I should like to make known to you. To be brief, if there is a secret on this earth that is worthy of the term . . . **SUBLIME** . . . surely this is it. Just thinking about it . . . makes me dizzy. . . . As you can see, it troubles me—to talk about it!

*Rumbling of the storm. He looks all around him.*

**THE COMMANDER, after a moment.** Does the secret concern the Count and myself?

**HERR ZACHARIAS.** First of all. Then, Germany. Then . . . the whole world.

**THE COMMANDER, to himself.** This old man! Hm! Unexpected candor, which bothers me. How to react? With indifference or attention?—Indifference is preferable: he will try to convince me.

*In a louder voice.*

Speak, then. But look at you, solemn as an Oriental ambassador. You alarm me.—Is your story very long?

**HERR ZACHARIAS.** I think I am in a position to assure you that you will have no regrets if you listen to it to the end. The Count will probably be back in less than half an hour: I therefore have just enough time to tell all, and my silence has been weighing heavy on me for—oh! for so many years!

**THE COMMANDER, smiling, pours himself some wine, his legs crossed, his elbows on the table, and illuminated by the torches.**

**HERR ZACHARIAS is standing in front of the fire; his hand is resting on the back of the other chair. Lowering his voice a bit.**

Does my lord perhaps remember an extraordinary event that took place in Germany—and that had repercussions

*Axel*

throughout the world—at the time of Count Gerhard of Auersperg's death?

THE COMMANDER, *smiling*. An . . . extraordinary event?

HERR ZACHARIAS. Yes.

THE COMMANDER. I have never seen anything extraordinary under the sun, Herr Zacharias! Except . . .

*Suddenly, as if struck by some distant memory, he starts, stares at the old steward, and says nothing for a moment. Then, in a different and solemn tone of voice.*

Begin.

*On hearing the word, HERR ZACHARIAS takes from his cloak a military map and various papers, which he silently unfolds and then spreads out on the table, under the eyes of the COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG.*

## THE TALE OF HERR ZACHARIAS

*Speaking like a man who at first is delivering a written speech he has long known by heart—then gradually becoming animated and improvising.*

Here are the records and documents; they go back to the precise time in our history when the event of which I am speaking took place. We were then threatened by that invasion which today seems to us a kind of fatal dream.

Combined with the successive reports of our armies' defeats in central Germany were semi-official rumors that the enemy was preparing a sudden offensive withdrawal to various states situated to the rear of the direction they were apparently taking. The cities in the zone that felt threatened (Frankfort, the electoral and financial center, most especially) began to tremble at the possibility of the extortion and violence the French soldiers would no doubt inflict—since the recruits, particularly, were conspicuous for their inhumanity out in the invaded provinces! Napoleon seemed to be rising up on all sides at once—for with a strange commander who, in three days, suddenly chanced to be thirty leagues from the point we had calculated, we had some grim surprises in store. It was terrifying indeed: we did not even think there was time to use the war loan that had just recently been issued. Remember, my lord, how the central cities looked, with all the houses closed up, the affliction, the distant gunfire, and the perpetual roar of the cannon—the wind carrying the sound of the tocsin down all the roads. . . .

THE COMMANDER. Do go on.

HERR ZACHARIAS. Yet even in those states that had taken such fright, no one was aware of the real extent of the danger, which, at that very moment, had been increased by a most

curious financial situation. In fact, for almost five weeks before those deadly rumors were spread, there had been, as a result of a kind of general panic and an undercurrent of irrational confidence (such phenomena are not rare in war-time), a flow of gold currency into the vaults of the Frankfurt National Bank.

*Unfolding a yellowed and very old piece of paper.*

In order to try and stem the flood, the Bank had long been giving notice, in vain, that it could no longer handle holdings except in gold specie. Here is a detailed list of the Bank's assets at the time—amassed, as a measure of precaution, under the low vaults of the main Treasury—in . . . almost four hundred barrels, sealed with the seals of the Confederation:

Assets, in minted gold, from national savings, underwriting bills of exchange, immobilized by the sudden cessation of business and of normal trade in Germany: forty-two million thalers. . . . Assets from the recent floating of war loans: seventy-six million thalers, in gold currency. . . . Bags of valuable deposits entrusted to the care of the city, cut diamonds, priceless jewels, necklaces and rivières of various gems, real pearls, goldsmiths' work, precious settings, ingots and bars of pure gold, with an estimated total of seventy-eight million thalers. . . . Shipments, in gold specie, from individual banks in Würtemberg, Bavaria, Saxony, and the Grand Duchies, as sums of money placed, without interest, under the protection of the city-state, seventy-five million thalers. . . . Various deposits from the nobility and the bourgeoisie, twenty-six million thalers, all in gold currency—etc., etc.—total holdings thus accumulated in the underground recesses and auxiliary vaults of the Treasury: around 350 million thalers: in other words, not counting the surplus balance, the incredibly huge assets of more than eleven hundred million French francs, representing the suddenly suspended circulation of more than two-thirds of the gold coinage, bearing both foreign and German effigies.



## *The Tale of Herr Zacharias*

~~THE~~ COMMANDER, *preoccupied, carefully observing him.* Yes, I know. Continue.

~~HEER~~ ZACHARIAS. That is why, when the possibility of an invasion of this precise spot in Germany was credited, the High Commission of Finance of the Confederation had to send the following notice to the governors of the Treasury: "Since it is now officially acknowledged that a considerable portion of these assets is to be used, namely, for military ends, if the imperial conqueror were to head for Frankfort and come to occupy it, he could, and altogether within the law—protecting himself with a preventive and defensive wartime measure—confiscate the whole of these enormous assets. Now, since any subsequent attempt to recover them could present difficulties or give rise to disputes, whatever the results of the campaign—it would be advisable, according to the custom in such exceptional circumstances, to make the necessary emergency arrangements, at once, for these assets to be sent, without delay, to a region of the country far from enemy action—and situated as far beyond the conjectural objectives of the enemy as possible." Therefore, upon receipt of this order, the Financial Council of the National Bank held a secret meeting and chose, to direct this important and perilous venture, three general officers of the highest repute, then stationed at military posts near the city: they were the following Generals—the Prince of Muthwild, the Count of Thungern, and finally, Count Gerhard of Auersperg, who accepted the command.  
*A pause.*

~~THE~~ COMMANDER, *thoughtful, to himself.* Yes. That is an event in the history of Germany which has remained a complete mystery.

~~HEER~~ ZACHARIAS. In his opinion two thousand Saxon horsemen and eighty artillery wagons would be enough. Separate orders to intercept any enemy attack in the area went out, within

the hour, to the commanders of surrounding divisions. They were planning to thrust out in the direction of the southwest, taking untrodden ways—with the Count of Auersperg at the head of the detachment, the Count of Thungern at the center, and the Prince of Muthwild at the rear—and by a very circuitous route, they would reach the fortress that was known only to the three heads of the expedition.

The very evening this decision was made, the four hundred precious iron barrels, collectively labeled appliances, munitions, and heavy missiles, were hoisted up, loaded on, and then fixed securely to the eighty wagons with chains and ropes, in the main courtyard of the Bank. Vacated by all the employees of the establishment, by order of the high command, it was surrounded during the operation by escort squadrons, which filed past the gateway, and each body of fifty horsemen was assigned to two wagons.

About midnight they left the city, which was kept in total darkness, its street lights turned off.

To what stronghold, agreed upon by the three commanders and the governors of the Treasury, were they first proceeding? . . . That information was no doubt later disclosed in high places. The fact remains that after a two-day march toward the most central point of the southwest, and on the repeated advice of his scouts, the Count of Auersperg, who had reason perhaps to fear some strange trouble ahead, spontaneously changed the itinerary and, on his own, in the name of the fearful responsibility that weighed upon his military honor, and having lost confidence in everyone, decided not to inform the authorities about it until the *essential* part of his burdensome task was completed.

THE COMMANDER, *pale and smiling*. Sit down, Zacharias: you are old; this tale is tiring your voice. Drink a nip of this wine—as glowing and gilded as all that gold you speak of! It will do you good.

## *The Tale of Herr Zacharias*

**HERR ZACHARIAS**, *who, bowing, makes a gesture of refusal, and who seems gradually to sink into a kind of visionary dream.* Then, no doubt—from the depths of his mind—arose the memory of an impenetrable fortified castle, lying forgotten in the heart of still and awesome forests, some hundred leagues deep. Its paths he had known as a child and he considered them negotiable for the narrow wagons behind him, bearing part of Germany's fortune! He no doubt also remembered that in those same forests was an inviolable repository, dug out centuries ago—a place of shadows, impossible of access to anyone but him, which could, at least until the imminent peace, protect—faithfully—that which had been entrusted to its very bowels. So it was to this place that he resolved to lead the men and treasures for which he was responsible in the eyes of the country—over roads that were bound to be safe from any possibility of enemy encounters. . . . And he led them, my lord—right here! *to this very out-of-the-way region we are in now.*

**THE COMMANDER** *gives a start, then looks at him dumb-founded.*

Under the interminable Forest, in the vicinity of this castle, under some rock formation now covered over with trees and vegetation, must surely be hidden the outlet of one of those undulated caverns that were hollowed out even before the Middle Ages—with secrets known only to the eldest members of the great military seigniorship to which they belonged—and which formerly, in the event of a blockade, were used for the provisioning of the castle and for night sallies. . . . And effortlessly recalling the road to that unforgettable outlet—which, in these mountainous parts of the Great Woods, must open, inward, onto a steep slope . . .

**THE COMMANDER**, *interrupting him.* At this point I will hear no more. If one can indeed imagine that the Count of Auersperg, in that fantastic decision with which you credit him, had

thought he could bury such considerable "munitions" in his own domainial soil and without arousing suspicion, how it is possible to believe that he had dared to rely on the discretion of two thousand men who, next day, would surely—first of all, among themselves—talk over their curious job of the night before? Even granting that he did consider it for a moment, being seriously alarmed—how is it possible to believe that general officers such as the Prince of Muthwild and the Count of Thungern had not dissuaded him, and refused to collaborate with him? You're dreaming, Zacharias.

HERR ZACHARIAS, *as if, lost in thought, having not even heard the interruption.* Yes! It must have been through some rainy twilight darkened further by the high foliage and the thickness of the brushwood that he led . . . over the wide paths of the Forest—at no more than some hundred steps from the precise spot where that cave, still out of sight, would open up at a knock from its hereditary master—yes—that he led . . . *Raising his head and looking at* THE COMMANDER.

. . . a mere detachment, oh! of perhaps two hundred men!—actually, those needed for the wagons—having left the rest of his now useless escort at one or two leagues from the edge of the forest. Once he had reached this uninhabited and constantly deserted region, the circle of danger was passed. *As if watching a hallucinatory scene.*

When the Count of Auersperg suddenly cried halt, the winding column of wagons and horsemen stopped. The Count of Thungern left the center and moved to the front of the first vehicle. Auersperg, now on foot, went ahead alone for quite a distance, examining his rows of trees—and at the bend in an ancient hedge of green boughs and high foliage, he all at once disappeared. No one around him. Moving ahead in the shadows, he looks carefully at certain rocks obscured by moss and vegetation, which he had at once distinguished from the other old stones in the immediate



## *The Tale of Herr Zacharias*

vicinity. He stretches himself out between the joints in the rocks, whose secrets had been revealed to him one day, when they were alone, by his father, who had learned it from his grandfather. And upon applying a particular pressure, causing the powerful old levers under the earth to squeak from rust, two of the huge rocks move apart, exposing the age-old entrance. Then, rising, he quickly summons the wagons, one after another, and each, in turn, files past the gaping chasm.

By the gleam of large dark-lanterns that have suddenly been lighted, the three men with each team of horses, accustomed to handling artillery, have rapidly—once all the moorings had been axed loose—hooked onto the backs of their wagons the inclined iron plane down which slide the metal barrels, held in place by stanchions. They roll headlong down the underground slope, and thus swept along by their own weight, will tumble violently along to the invisible confines of the long cavern. And the wagon moves on, continuing down the forest road, and is soon joined by the next—and then the next, until the end is reached.

Two hours were enough. The other two leaders silently took their places at either end of the detachment—waiting for the Count of Auersperg to join them at a spot they had agreed upon. Meanwhile, remaining alone in the dark night, he soon got the shifting earth-covered rocks, which had been moved apart or raised, to fall back into place over the forbidden entrance. It is done! The awesome treasure is well buried in impenetrable darkness.

Now, my lord—first of all, given their profound and very natural conviction that the four hundred iron barrels contained, as is the custom with artillery, only lead, powder, or steel military appliances—in other words, ordinary munitions (how, in any case, could they have guessed the truth, considering the amount!)—the men of that special detachment, selected because they originally came from the Saxon countries farthest from the Schwarzwald—lost in the woods, along

thousands of winding roads on which only the Count of Auersperg could find his way—exhausted by the long distance, fearful of meeting the enemy in the vicinity of some imaginary fortress whose casemates they thought they were supplying with fresh munitions—blindfolded, as it were, by the rain and the dawn on their sudden arrival, and by the night as they withdrew—soon joined again by the Count himself during their dangerous march—and supposedly being led, next day, to outlying spots in the thick of combat—how could some vague and obscure suspicion in the mind of even one of them have the slightest consequence? And moreover, with peace being near at hand, how could the fear of plunder have henceforth any reality there?

THE COMMANDER, *very calm, observing* HERR ZACHARIAS. That is quite an ingenious tale you have invented, Herr Zacharias! . . . History, alas, is altogether different. It informs us that the three general officers of whom you speak had indeed been entrusted, by the High Commission of Finance of the Confederation, with transferring our vast national wealth to a stronghold in western Germany. Forced, by the diffusion of the French troops, to take unexpected detours, the convoy had to pass along the Bavarian border—and then move ahead to the center: all of this according to a course marked out on military maps.

HERR ZACHARIAS. On the one right in front of you.

THE COMMANDER. Now, it was at a spot more than twenty-five leagues from all the approaches to the Black Forest that—true, after an incident which remains unaccountable—the General of Auersperg, as well as his two lieutenants, happened to be together one day, somewhat ahead of the convoy—which, without any doubt, was captured by the enemy.

### *The Tale of Herr Zacharias*

There, from the top of protected heights, they were noticed by a reconnaissance brigade of French riflemen. . . .

~~THE~~ ZACHARIAS, *placing a finger on the map*. Here is the exact spot!

~~THE~~ COMMANDER. Since from there the enemy could not have made them prisoners, they opened fire on them—swiftly, continuously, and murderously—leaving not one of them alive, it appears, and so exterminated them in less than a quarter of an hour. The Count of Auersperg was found to have been hit by several bullets in the head and chest; and his two seconds met with more or less the same fate. Confronted by this more than ambiguous fatality, I can but agree with everyone that this incident of the war, combined with the disastrous capture or the inconceivable disappearance of such colossal wealth . . . gone astray . . . will forever remain one of the extraordinary riddles of history.

~~THE~~ ZACHARIAS. My lord, I am personally convinced that a piece of premeditated treachery, a betrayal, perpetrated too late by the Great Ones who conceived it, lay behind the seeming "fatality" of that military assassination. Ah! How many times have I had the feeling of being on their tracks, during the painstaking investigation I so patiently conducted! . . . What good would it do even to inform you that the book of receipts, the list of vouchers delivered in the names of the depositaries, has been destroyed, burned! I have proof of it! Be assured, however, of one thing: that the enemy captured only the wagons, which were still covered but empty!—that before he entered the forest, Count Gerhard of Auersperg had sent off into combat, toward the borders of the central principalities, the rest of his two thousand men, whom he no longer needed—on the contrary! Hence those few horsemen

*Axel*

with him during the fatal event that took place . . . just two days after the incidents I have just reconstructed.

THE COMMANDER, *after a moment*. What are your grounds for assuming all this?

HERR ZACHARIAS, *lowering his voice*. Forty-eight hours before the very day he is said to have been killed, the Count of Auersperg came here, to the castle, around midnight.

THE COMMANDER, *very pale, rising abruptly*. Are you sure?

HERR ZACHARIAS, *calmly*. I happened to be sitting up in the lower hall of the tower when, first, I heard the gallop of his horse as he came through the main postern—then suddenly I saw Count Gerhard enter, hiding his uniform under a cavalry coat.

THE COMMANDER. Here? Him! . . . Why?

HERR ZACHARIAS, *somewhat astonished*. But, I should imagine, in order to give a farewell kiss to the woman he loved so desperately, the woman who, in a very few days, was to give him a son! Countess Lisvia of Auersperg, then pregnant with my lord Axel, had sought seclusion here during the war and was confined to bed the whole time, weak and ill; she thus at least had the joy of seeing her husband once again before death reunited them. The fatal news of two days hence was kept from her right to the end. Perhaps, during that hasty and very short visit, the Count of Auersperg left her a note of some kind, meant for his son, in the event that the dangers he perhaps foresaw would leave his son an orphan. What has become of that note? Did it even exist? I don't know.

THE COMMANDER, *who has recovered and thought things over for a moment*. Herr Zacharias, I somewhat doubt, in spite of



### *The Tale of Herr Zacharias*

myself, the reality of that whole dream! . . . But why have you informed me of such a secret?

HERR ZACHARIAS. Alas! Because I am very old, my lord! and am about to die. Because in this case inaction has taken the proportions of a crime—and I have not dared to carry with me to the grave the remorse of having kept silent! Because, given the insignificant compensation voted in the past, the vouchers, thus bought up by the states at a low price, are now destroyed—and, in reality, those amazing treasures *today no longer belong to anyone!* . . . Because my master, to whom I have disclosed everything—including details that justify my suppositions even more—never tried or planned, insofar as I know, to recover those incalculable riches, but strictly forbade us ever to mention them to him again! Because he made us swear, and I was one of four, never to allude to them even among ourselves, not even under our breath. . . . Now three years have flown by since we took that weighty oath . . . and never a word! I don't know what strange and terrible science Master Janus is teaching him . . . but, in truth, one would think . . . *that he has forgotten!* No one in high circles would listen to me, an old man living way out in these distant forests! You, my lord, you are powerful. You have the ear of kings! I therefore thought I could break my oath—a sinful one, really—so that you might act in behalf of my far too indifferent master. Thus glory, power, and wealth will come to him in spite of himself! . . . And I wanted to fulfill my duty to the memory of his noble father, who was your kin and your friend.

*The sound of a horn is heard from far down the carriage  
fence.*

Here is my lord Axel! Decide, now.

*He hastily rolls up his papers and hides them under his cloak.*

## *Axel*

THE COMMANDER, *who has watched him very intently.* Herr Zacharias, you are a wise and loyal servant. All I can answer you is that I am leaving tonight—and before three months are up, you will have news of me in this castle.

*A reaction of joy from HERR ZACHARIAS. Then, to himself, considering.*

This I may say: my room is ready, at one hour's ride from here, at least, by the Lowroads, at the Three Storks Inn—by the Wald-Kreutz crossroads; my valet Otto and the first two guides are awaiting me there . . . and I can be there at eleven-thirty tonight. I shall thus be rested for the first six leagues of this stage of the journey. Tomorrow, then, at dawn, on horseback! And in a few days, out of the Forest! And . . . a post chaise to Berlin! There, once what remains of my fortune is realized, if I go about it cautiously . . . why not try, alone and in secret, to conquer this fantastic Golden Fleece? . . . O surprising revelation! . . . If only it were true!

*The sound of footsteps in the vestibule; in a lower voice, a finger to his lips.*

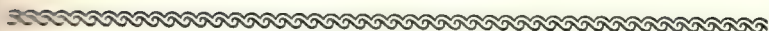
Silence.

*At the back of the hall appears AXEL OF AUERSPERG. He would seem to be between twenty-three and twenty-four years old. He is of a very tall build and of an admirable virile beauty. His muscular elegance and the proportions of his person bespeak a powerful strength of body. His face, of a paleness almost radiant, emerging from beneath his long, wavy brown hair, has an expression mysterious from thought.*

*He is dressed in a black leather suit with steel buttons. He is wearing an otter-skin cap with an eagle's feather, a rifle on his shoulder, an ax on his belt.*

*He stands motionless for a moment, on the threshold of the hall.*

# THE EXTERMINATOR



## SCENE VIII

THE SAME, AXEL OF AUERSPERG

**AXEL.** Greetings, cousin.

**THE COMMANDER.** Good evening, Axel. Was the hunting good?

**AXEL, smiling.** It always is.

**THE COMMANDER.** In such hellish weather? So you're the *black hunter*! Just listen! . . . I'll bet the drive is crowded with demons!

**AXEL, walking over to the wall and hanging his heavy rifle between two of the eagles.** In April, bad weather clears up in no time.—Are you still determined to leave us this evening?

**THE COMMANDER, after a glance at HERR ZACHARIAS.** I really must; the King does not wait.

*Upon hearing that, HERR ZACHARIAS, delighted, leaves the hall.*

**AXEL, smiling.** Then long live the King!

*In a tone of gracious courtesy.*

And . . . shall we dine?

**THE COMMANDER.** A very good idea; I'm ravenous.

*They sit down. The rain has stopped; the storm seems to have settled into the woods.*

## SCENE IX

**AXEL, THE COMMANDER, UKKO, then GOTTHOLD, MIKLAUS, and HARTWIG**

*Axel*

UKKO *enters from the back, followed by HARTWIG, who is holding, at the end of his one arm, a heavy hamper with wines; GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS, who have come in from the right, are carrying silver dishes filled with food; UKKO takes two of the dusty bottles and uncorks them.*

THE COMMANDER, *to himself, thoughtful.* One would think he had forgotten! . . . Herr Zacharias told me. I must first make absolutely sure of it.

UKKO, *half-filling the crystal goblets.* Burgundy.

AXEL, *unfolding his napkin.* So you won't drink the *maytrank* with us. What a pity; I think you would have found that, here, it had the fresh taste of springtime.

THE COMMANDER, *doing the same, nonchalantly.* It can't be helped! To your health.

*He drinks; then, his eye on the venison being carved by GOTTHOLD.*

Why, it's a haunch of boar! I fancy I had already guessed it from its heady aroma! But let's see: would the cook's boy have forgotten to add the red pepper and vanilla?

*He tastes it.*

No: What very good luck.

AXEL, *to MIKLAUS.* Some water, please.

THE COMMANDER, *laughing, and in a free and easy tone.* As regards wild boar, I once had some that was very fine indeed, at the home of the Aulic counsellor, Johannes Herner, the day I received the chamberlain's keys from His Majesty, the King. Yet it was prepared differently, if my memory serves me. Yes. That day the old boar had to be prepared with truffles from France, spices from England, and bay leaves



## *The Exterminator*

from Sicily. Festooned with clear quince jelly, it was served to us, all dreamy-eyed, on a bed of aromatic plants. Axel, I recommend the recipe to your master cook: a gentleman cannot care enough about his table.

**AXEL**, *Tell me, cousin: this afternoon you turned your horse round and galloped back toward the castle; does hunting bore you—or were you concerned about saving your strength for the two hundred leagues you have ahead of you?*

**THE COMMANDER**, *eating and drinking*. I wanted to get a little delightful sleep to the sound of your tireless horn, that's all.

**AXEL**, *doing the same*. And—did you have beautiful dreams?  
**UKKO** *silently pours them more wine*.

**THE COMMANDER**, *casually, with some remote purpose behind his words, and almost indistinctly*. Golden dreams. In fact, I dreamed about that ancient king of Lydia who had merely to cast his net into the river Pactolus to find it filled with a fry of solid gold. The most beautiful of all dreams!

**AXEL**, *staring at him and, after a pause, raising his German Gothic glass*. To its reality!

**THE COMMANDER**, *to himself, dubious*. Hmm! . . .  
*Aloud, and leaning back in his chair, smiling*.

Axel, I feel almost a prey to melancholy this evening—and it is not only because I am leaving you. Of course, the table is dazzling, the cloth and this old Bohemian crystal are beautiful to look at! But . . . we are alone—and out there, at the Court suppers, the gold, under the candlelight, combines so well with the women's white complexions! Their eyes and their malicious little white teeth, their smiles, so absurd and so bewitching, blend so well with the lights! The red flowers

*Axel*

—the roses especially—go so nobly with their black hair! And everything about them—even the silk, steeped in their perfume—casts such an invincibly magic spell on the ecstasy of a fine supper! Ah! my friend, if you would give up your exile and deign to follow me into that world of feasts, luxury, and loves . . .

*Lowering his voice a bit and in a tone of playful self-satisfaction.*

Look here, if you could only see—just once—the pretty Princess of Muthwild, for example?

*AXEL, after an imperceptible shudder at the name.* Well, what would happen, Commander?

*THE COMMANDER, to himself, undecided.* Hmm!

*Aloud.*

But you would sleep no more! Imagine: a widowed child, so clever that she awaited her husband's death with lowered eyes . . . and with the patience of an angel! The dear prince! . . . Legend has it that his father, an esteemed general, met with the same fate as your noble father—caught unawares by a body of enemy riflemen during the invasion. End of the race.

*A pause. AXEL has remained unmoved.*

So that, without ever marrying again, Princess Karola can, if she likes, amuse herself at her palace in Berlin, under cover of her coat of arms draped in mourning. And I assure you that if she allowed you, just once—you, the guest she most desires for her night feasts!—if she allowed you a glimpse of the sparkle in her blue eyes—and her lovely lips!—between the crystal of your glass and the glow of the candles . . . you would lose sleep.

*AXEL, smiling.* Do you really think so?

### *The Exterminator*

THE COMMANDER, *laughing*. He has some doubt! . . . Ah! Don't slander yourself; and don't reduce your future friends to idleness.

AXEL. Could the women out there, in life, be that captivating?

THE COMMANDER. Most of them are. And also . . .

*In a confidential tone.*

Look here, the intoxication of stealing them away from their ineffable husbands actually triples the joy of conquering them. After three love affairs in society, no man would probably ever again desire Proserpina unless her savor was spiced with the incensed jealousy of gloomy Pluto!—I can see an expression of youthful surprise in your eyes—but for us, in amorous situations, the burning torment of the man who loves her passionately may well be the main attraction of the woman who shows us preference. That spice, understood by all and which often determines our choice, is such a fine seasoning for the higher diversion we call love!

AXEL. Really? I thought that women with more sober hearts still existed.

THE COMMANDER. Come now, all of them are supremely charitable; only, they choose their poor. That is what, in society, we call virtue. As for their feelings . . .

*He deeply inhales the scent of a bunch of forest flowers placed between his wine glasses.*

What does it matter whether such voluptuously smelling flowers have sober or frivolous hearts?

AXEL. Won't you have a bit more of this pheasant pâté?

THE COMMANDER, *accepting*. Austere killer of wolves, may I say that I usually find pâté the heaviest of metals, but this one,

*Axel*

conceived by an inspired mind, justifies the risk I take so daringly.

*A pause.*

And you, Axel? You seem not to be eating much and . . . worried?

AXEL. I was thinking that the downpour may have made bogs in the road. Ukko, unleash two of the mastiffs to beat down the high grass in front of us. Then, around ten o'clock, saddle the horses, with dark lanterns on the saddlebows. I shall ride Wunder.

THE COMMANDER. Actually, what is that strange hour that's striking?

AXEL, *smiling*. That is not the hour: the wind, blowing violently into the tower, is knocking the clapper against the bell. But it is now nine, I think.

THE COMMANDER, *observing* AXEL. Ah! Ha! That's the time when merchants go to sleep "with an easy mind." Our good ancestors are no longer here to rob them a little on the high-ways. Yes, in the olden days we sometimes relieved them of their spoils, it's true! the "honest" bourgeois, the "honest" merchants, the "honest" Jews—in short, the fine flower of the human flora! And we did it without even asking ourselves what pillage, what usury, what wiles were the too legitimate source of their honest savings. In truth, I don't blame our forefathers too much for the way they acted! Hasn't the hunter always had the right to remove the game from between his dogs' fangs? In fact, the noble lords used to justify their acts by the precept that not might but fearlessness is right! . . . They were one against a thousand: but they were obeyed. Why? Because might goes along with courage, the



*The Exterminator*

only touchstone of noblemen! I should never take honesty for honor.

**AXEL**, *as though he had not listened*. Ukko and I will accompany you to the Wald-Kreutz crossroads, for one may easily go astray in the forest or encounter wolves.

**MIKLAUS**. The rifles are in good order, my lord, and so are the spears and hunting knives.

**THE COMMANDER**, *to himself, suddenly cold and somber, considering Axel*. But no! It's unthinkable! yet I do believe our Herr Zacharias was right—he is a negligent young man who forgot.—Who knows? When the opportunity arises, the darkness and the torrents would be in my favor! . . . Accidents in the Black Forest are quite natural at night: if I dared to put an end to him straightaway—with two shots—it would clarify the situation. Am I not his heir? And . . . what an inheritance it may be!

**AXEL**. Where is Walter Schwert?

**GOTTHOLD**. My lord, he has gone to the village to get fresh provisions for the castle.

**HARTWIG**. He has certainly got very wet, and on bad nights like this the lynxes are surely on the prowl. . . .

**MIKLAUS**. Oh! Franz has gone along with the majordomo: and they took their weapons with them, and three of the tawny dogs—as well as Rasch, the dog that doesn't bark.

**AXEL**. Poor good old man!

*To MIKLAUS.*

*Axel*

Do heat some old French wine for him. Ah! . . . I no longer want him to go out so late in future.

THE COMMANDER, *under his breath, absently, laying his napkin on the table.* How you do take care of them!

AXEL, *after glancing at the windows.* But the sky has cleared; there are the stars.—Will you come to us again, cousin?

THE COMMANDER, *looking up at him.* Soon, I hope.

AXEL. To your next visit!

*They drink, then stand up.*

THE COMMANDER, *smiling and with the sudden abandon of hearty effusiveness.* Axel, you definitely have a happy disposition and—look here! I have decided to ask you a very special question before I leave. I have something to say to you, but alone.

MIKLAUS and GOTTHOLD, *at a gesture from the COUNT OF AUERSPERG, have carried the table, still lighted, under the arch formed by the stone stairway. UKKO puts two glasses and a jug on a sideboard placed under the mantelpiece; then, with the help of HARTWIG, he moves the two chairs close to the fire.*

*The hall is now a vast open space, where AXEL and THE COMMANDER chat as they pace back and forth.*

*The three retainers and UKKO go out at the back of the hall.*

## SCENE X

THE COMMANDER, AXEL

*Alone.*

THE COMMANDER, *to himself, scrutinizing AXEL.* No, while he might perhaps be able to clear up the mystery for me once

### *The Exterminator*

and for all, the royal secret hasn't even entered the boy's mind. There must be a way to extract some information from him—information he never realized was important. Surely, he must know something, in spite of himself! I must . . . win all his confidence, before coming to any decision.

**AXEL.** Commander, I am listening.

**THE COMMANDER,** *still to himself.* Let's, then, be fatherly, protective, a good counselor! Nothing could be worth the old maxims of wisdom and morality so suitable for dazzling the inexperienced and making it easy to gain a deadly influence over them. The rest, as regards tonight, has been decided.

**AXEL,** *smiling.* Well?

**THE COMMANDER,** *aloud.* Now then!—this time I am speaking quite seriously—what in the devil are you doing here, Count, in this ancient dwelling, in this forgotten castle, secluded in the depths of paradoxical forests, when, were you attached to any one of our kings, a magnificent future would be in store for you? You have knowledge, boldness, intelligence: it is sinful of you to remain idle within these four tumbledown walls. Forward! I call on you to make your way. You are an Auersperg; it is time you remembered it.

**AXEL,** *heedlessly.* Shall we change the subject?

**THE COMMANDER.** Axel, I dearly loved your father; I must speak on behalf of our ancient name. What is the meaning of this blind friendship for your invisible tablemate, that so-called "Master Janus"?—granted, your tutor! He really must be a consoling companion, that one—and very gay on winter nights, if I am to go by his reputation! Has one the right to

*Axel*

sacrifice the brilliance of a whole race in that way, immersed in heaven knows what studies? . . .

AXEL, *grave and simple*. I must warn you that I have transferred my filial respect to the man of whom you speak. My father knew him in the army—that war companion who twice saved his life.

THE COMMANDER. If at least he were a really capable man . . .

AXEL, *naïvely*. Capable of what?

THE COMMANDER. Well, after all, you—a young intellect—are squandering the brightest years of your life on these hollow investigations into some would-be Hermetic science! I have glanced over the titles of the unwholesome tomes in your library; do you revel in all that dank dust? You are allowing yourself to be indoctrinated by a visionary who lives in your castle. Do you actually believe that there are still “occult” sciences? But it is so supremely ingenuous as to verge on the ridiculous, my poor cousin! If you want to play at living in the Middle Ages—all right! This place is made for it; it is an innocent pastime and has even a certain grandeur about it. But to carry the travesty to the point of reviving the seekers of the Philosopher’s Stone with the help of retorts and long-necked mattresses! and dreaming of alloying mercury and sulphur . . . ah! I still cannot believe it.—You know the potable gold that remains at the bottom of the crucible? . . . Your youth. Come now! The devil with those old rags, which, as a matter of fact, are not becoming to a gentleman! Imitate me. Grab hold of life, just as it is, with no illusions and no weakness. Make your way! Have a long run!—and leave madmen to their madness.



*The Exterminator*

**ABEL.** Cousin, I give credit to everything you say.—A glass of Hungarian wine?

*He fills THE COMMANDER's glass.*

**THE COMMANDER.** To conclude: My name is *real life*, do you understand? Is, then, indulging one's imagination (and doing so in feudal, battlemented manors, which no longer make any sense and are only tolerated today as historic curiosities for the diversion of travelers) the way to achieve something tangible and stable? Leave this antiquated tomb! Your intelligence needs air. Come with me! I will guide you out there at Court, where intelligence itself means nothing if it is not properly directed. Leave your fancies here! Walk on this earth, as befits a man. Make yourself feared. Become powerful again. But lay your hands on everything you can! One must succeed! And into the nettles and the torrents with all that stock of fictions which you'd laugh about until you cried before three weeks were up, if you followed me into the world of royalty. For the last time, I beseech you: come and make your way. Who can hold you here? You have no secrets, I take it, nor is there any question of money or of passion! In that case, why this absurd exile?

**ABEL,** *calmly, and sitting down near the sideboard.* My dear and cordial cousin, I am touched—to tears, in fact—by the interest you show in me. Your advice was most eloquently expressed—and there is no doubt I shall make the most of it in due course.

**THE COMMANDER,** *to himself.* By all the demons—what an incomprehensible boy! . . . Now then! What am I to believe? Has he really forgotten? Does he mean to keep silent because of some instinctive suspicion? And that legend itself, does it actually have any basis in fact? What would I risk if I questioned him right now, categorically? Whether he keeps silent

or speaks, I should at least know where I stood. . . . First, let's try to sound out his heart.

*Aloud.*

Would you, then, miss every opportunity to revive the glory of our family—you, our eldest branch? And merely for the pleasure of burying your mind in obscure meditations? Your indifference astounds me. Positively.

*A pause.*

I see you have the same reaction to my proposals . . . as, say, to those alleged treasures, you know what I mean—those extraordinary riches that my old friend, the Count of Auersperg, your father, was entrusted with safeguarding, at the time of the French invasion, after our setbacks: treasures in hard cash, duly packed in barrels, from more than three States of the Confederation! In other words, if I have not been taken in by some tall tale, wantonly elaborated, like so many others, around an ambiguous but unquestionable historical fact, it would appear—eh? . . . that all of it was perhaps not absolutely lost? . . . that the eighty wagons of the Frankfort National Bank were empty when two or three enemy brigades seized them, in the thick of that deadly skirmish in which your father lost his life—indeed, that the four hundred barrels of gold and bullion, not to mention chests of precious stones, are probably not far from here? in the vicinity of this estate—heaven knows! Look here, Auersperg, it would seem to me that, even if one were only half-certain about it, it would at least be worth looking into. Well, have you tried, made an effort, searched, imagined? Nothing, it appears. . . . Yet I must say that, as dreams go, that one was not undeserving of a little attention, for the historical fact did give it a basis in reality; and with such grounds, even an affair that was *uncertain but well managed* could have been—and still can be—more than profitable for us. Listen! I am your kinsman, your elder, and your friend; our cause is the same; you can therefore be frank with me? I heard this story, in-

### *The Exterminator*

deed by chance, this very day. For God's sake, try hard to remember before I leave! What, in all that, is strictly true?

*During the whole speech AXEL was looking at THE COMMANDER with a steady gaze. He stands up and walks over to the door at the back of the hall.*

*AXEL, calmly.* Just one moment, please, Commander.

*Calling.*

Herr Zacharias!

*THE COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG, who has walked down to the hearth and turned crimson from the sudden great glow of the high flames, pours himself some wine. HERR ZACHARIAS appears at the back of the hall, followed by UKKO.*

## SCENE XI

THE SAME, HERR ZACHARIAS, and UKKO

*UKKO, aside, and smiling, after glancing at AXEL.* Aha, lightning is about to strike.

*HERR ZACHARIAS.* Did my lord call me?

*AXEL, in an undertone.* Come over here, beside me.

*HERR ZACHARIAS walks over to him; AXEL looks at him in silence; then, in a low voice.*

You have spoken!

*HERR ZACHARIAS, after a moment.* In the name of your race, which I have served for eighty years, my lord, I dared want to save the vast treasure before I died!

*AXEL, with a terrifying look, and in a hollow voice.* Hush! . . .  
*To UKKO, very quietly.*

Two swords. And have Gotthold, Miklaus, and Hartwig

*Axel*

come here shortly, in their former uniforms, with torches—and also their old swords. Say nothing.

HERR ZACHARIAS *staggers out at the back of the hall*. UKKO *disappears, after motioning knowingly to the* COUNT OF AUERSPERG.

*The end of the scene takes place beside the threshold and is not heard by* KASPAR OF AUERSPERG. *During the last few minutes the storm outside, after a lull, has again started to rage. The rain has again begun to beat against the windows, and there is lightning.*

## SCENE XII

AXEL, THE COMMANDER, *then* UKKO *and the three*  
MILITARY RETAINERS

THE COMMANDER, *seated, his back turned, and warming himself before the fire*. Count, let us be positive, let us be down to earth. I shall take it upon myself, to good purpose, to call the attention of the sovereigns of Württemberg, Bavaria, and Saxony to the possibility of recovering those fantastic riches that vanished. And if, as I am ready to allow, there is something really serious at the bottom of that whole plausible story, I—do you understand?—shall undertake to extract from it a more than princely fortune for us both. A godsend that would be twice miraculous: for I am ruined, my friend, and the few thousand florins you agree not to withhold from me, out of the inheritance of our last cousin, Wilferl of Auer-sperg, mean no more to me than the smoke produced by a few drops of this golden wine on that red-hot shovel. Look here! Can't you recall some bit of information that flashed, like a spark, during talks with your forest rangers—dealing, for example, with the possible outlets of ancient underground passages in this mountainous part of the Black Forest? What!



## *The Exterminator*

that detachment of some two hundred men, moving round in the woods, left no trace in the memory of the old country people, no trace of how long they perhaps stayed, whatever the precautions they thought it necessary to take? Have you never heard anything about it, even a vague rumor? nothing you noticed in your father's papers . . . in the secret documents of our ancestors? But it's incredible! If you consider that with: first, the certainty that those fabulous assets still exist, and second, one or two guide marks, determined by personal or local traditions, there can be no doubt that, with the support of certain calculations familiar to all military engineers, we would surely obtain a credit of some five or six million thalers within a few days. And I tell you that in less than two months at most—three, even four, if you like—of work and serious excavation in the vicinity of this castle, using a thousand of our miners, if necessary, night and day . . . Imagine the glorious and lucrative result of such an exceptional adventure! It would be proclaimed throughout Germany! What do you say?

*He turns round and sees the COUNT OF AUERSPERG, very somber, standing, his arms folded, at the back of the hall.*

Well, what is it? What's wrong?

*TEKKO returns. He silently shows his master two dueling swords, holding them at the middle. GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS, in their former white cuirassiers' uniforms, appear at the back of the hall, each raising a torch with his left hand and holding an unsheathed sword in his right. HARTWIG is holding a sword in his one hand. The yellowed tails of their white helmets tangle with the hair of their white moustaches.*

*In silence, each one walks over to one of the three doors and stands there motionless. THE COMMANDER, somewhat surprised, looks at them.*

Listen, but—what is this, some fanciful ceremony? . . . Is, by any chance, your "Master Janus" about to show us

*Axel*

some fine piece of wizardry? It would be a charming gesture.

*He stands up.*

### SCENE XIII

AXEL, THE COMMANDER, GOTTHOLD, HARTWIG, MIKLAUS,  
UKKO, *then, at the end*, MASTER JANUS

AXEL, *walking over to THE COMMANDER and saluting him.*  
Cousin, you just made some personal remarks that offended me. You shall make amends for them at once. You are no longer my guest. As a dueling ground, this hall is excellent, especially given the bad weather.

THE COMMANDER, *after a pause.* Hare-brained boy, you're delirious!

AXEL, *continuing.* You have acquired renown in Germany for your masterful skill with the sword, sir; it will therefore be our weapon. We shall fight ruthlessly, unceasingly . . .

THE COMMANDER, *interrupting him.* What! Is one to go along like this with the sudden fit of insanity that has just overcome the Count of Auersperg?

AXEL, *quietly finishing his sentence.* . . . to the bitter end: to the death.

THE COMMANDER, *brief and haughty.* On what account?

AXEL. Oh! Very often, when traveling, some adventure or other obliges one to draw one's sword, either at the turning of a main road or at the back of an alley in some chance town . . . because of a quarrel that began for no special reason—

## *The Exterminator*

merely an unprovoked assault. I therefore do not see the need for inordinately justifying the bluntness of my challenge, more especially since I am proposing a very legitimate duel, after all.

THE COMMANDER. Bah!

AXEL. Judge for yourself. So long as I am standing, you will not leave this hall; but since you are the prisoner of no one but myself, you would have only to wound me seriously to be allowed to pass, with no other obstacle in your way. If, say, you still had the advantage but it cost you some injury, the same care would be lavished on you, under my roof, as on myself. As soon as you were fit again, you would be accompanied to the boundaries of this land, and no signs of resentment would be shown you by my people. You cannot object to the seconds now here in this hall: they are Knights of the Iron Cross; nor to my page: I can vouch for the fact that he is of a race as loyal as it is valorous. These witnesses, then, on their honor and on their faith, will keep—without shirking it and without distorting it through any guile—the promise I now make to you . . . the promise of their lord and friend.

*Turning round.*

Swear.

*The glow of the blades and the torches, which are quivering in the hands of the old soldiers, make the steel of the cuirasses sparkle. Finally, all three silently extend their swords. UKKO, at an imperious glance from AXEL, raises his right hand, after gestating rather fiercely.*

It is sworn.

UKKO. *simply, but in a solemn tone of voice.* Grudgingly.

THE COMMANDER. I'm surrounded: are you satisfied? Look! but . . . a death trap, that's what your place is, cousin! You might

*Axel*

at least put up a sign warning travelers, damn it! . . . Of course, I should never refuse a duel—even in such circumstances—but how is one to take this tragic and most shockingly antiquated display seriously? Really, the whole thing is aimed at producing a kind of bugbear effect that would hardly move a swordsman. As for me, I cannot help smiling a bit. Believe me, stop this spectacle as soon as possible—before it could become fatal for you . . . were I given to bullying children.

AXEL, *impassive*. In the event that I should be clumsy with my hand, you would be placed below, in the family tomb. Yet the notification that would soon be sent to your King, informing him of your death, would state, I must warn you, that you had fallen into some mountain torrent in these vast forests and disappeared.

*Pointing to a pen, ink, and parchment on one of the crowded black workbenches, to the right of the hearth.*

If, then, you have any arrangements to make, do please write them down quickly.

THE COMMANDER *shrugs his shoulders, folds his arms, and looks at him.*

No? Very well.

AXEL *walks up to UKKO, who hands him the two swords. Then again facing THE COMMANDER, AXEL offers them to him, hilt first.*

Choose.

THE COMMANDER, *irritated and haughty, with impatience.* Move aside!

AXEL, *coldly.* Move me!

THE COMMANDER, *having, on the off chance, grabbed one of the swords—in a hollow voice.* On your guard!



*The Exterminator*

**AXEL**, *calm*. On guard!

**THE COMMANDER**. One last time, in the name of the family to which we both belong, I call upon you to state clearly your grievances.

**AXEL**, *in an undertone*. Raise the torches!

**THE COMMANDER**. You have nothing to say?

**AXEL**, *who, sword in hand, has moved back to give himself room, answers with a mere nod*.

Cowardice!

*The lightning, flashing through the windows, and the glow of the torches and swords light up the high-ceilinged hall. A distant rumbling of thunder. AXEL shudders, then walks over to THE COMMANDER.*

**AXEL**, *calm and awful*. Look at me squarely, straight in the eye.

What sincere contact was ever possible between us other than the contact of swords? Did you think you were touching me when you shook my hand? Or seeing my real face when I smiled at you? As a guest in my home, I had to tolerate your unseemly and impoverished words . . . but within myself, I was listening to voices other than yours.

Yet I heard you, as one hears the vague cries of animals, far off in the woods. Oh! Don't jump at what I say: don't fiddle that sword of yours: pointless affectation here.

**THE COMMANDER**, *making his long blade whistle*. You madman!

I . . .

**AXEL**, *unmoved*. Later. Three times you defied me to answer.

Don't listen to me, then: Am I thus speaking for you alone!

. . . Why should I care about your lack of attention—when,

clearly, you would be incapable of understanding me! . . . But consider yourself warned: by your ill-advised boasting, you have forfeited your right to interrupt me, and to claim it now would be merely one more proof of a foolhardy manner that might end, accordingly, by straining my generosity. So less noise—and let's take a look at what we are, since you asked for it.

*A pause, broken only by the noise of the downpour and the thunder. THE COMMANDER folds his arms, as if, curious to hear, he has made up his mind to remain impassive.*

You, who so readily decrees the "insanity" of others, what proof have you given us of your own good sense! You urged me to "seek my fortune," suggesting that I *follow your example*: and the next moment, you admit that you are ruined! . . . Before being so arrogant, you might begin by curing your mind of that so-called wisdom which could but lead you into such disastrous situations!

But no; you consider that you have a good head on your shoulders, don't you? and you think that with one piece of sarcasm, you can always and triumphantly judge an attempt at understanding concepts that are inaccessible to you, sciences that are beyond your grasp, conversations of tranquil and severe beauty which, being fruitless in your eyes, would ever bore you and be closed to you.

Yet what profitable subjects do you introduce into our talks to substitute for what might perhaps be of interest in those things? A solemn analysis of the spices in a sauce or hymns on the flavor of a pâté! Really, however insignificant the object of my favorite studies may be in your opinion, it is hard to see what I gained, this evening, in the exchange, by listening to you.

But let us go on—peering at some ghosts or other through your wine glass at supper, you jeered at the wholesome illusion of my faith in married love as the only love—yes, the only love worthy of the name.

## *The Exterminator*

Yet what did you extol, in contempt of that youthful, virginal, and very justifiable dream, which, to begin with, called, if not for your "respect" (I doubt that you are fit to feel respect for anything at all in this world) at least for your silence?

Ah! How loathsome they are, the joys of foul adultery! So that, under my mother's holy roof, you made me blush, and I then, before the chaste flowers, felt ashamed at the hideous way in which you inhaled their scent.

For example, in a haughty tone, you trumpeted the title "gentleman"; indeed, you uttered the word at every turn, like a bourgeois. Yet what proof of generous birth or of inner lordship have you just given, to sanction that infatuation, so trifling here? . . . You were astonished to see me concerned about a good servant, who has grown old in my house, and who, at this hour, is still walking, lost in the storm, a prey to all the dangers of the night, to serve me.

Finally, in this house—whose mourning, age, and glory you even deigned to mock, when you owe the little that you seem to be to nothing but those ancestors who blessed it with their presence—you suggested, if I remember rightly, that I follow you and subjugate the integrity of my intelligence and my life to the nothingness of a thousand ludicrous intrigues, that I go and yawn at your side in a variety of princely antechambers, and you call that "making one's way." For you, possibly. You follow your own inclinations. They are not mine, that's all. But let it pass! My way? It has been mapped out for centuries. How would you aspire to make me deviate from it by your advice, when, by your own admission, zero happens to be about the round sum total and only "positive" result to which you have been led—as regards your position in the State, influence, actual esteem, illustrious renown, and fortune—by your wise and skeptical maxims, hollow as the nutshells flung aside by monkeys? Less arrogance, and call no one here a madman but yourself. If you were not equal

to . . . even your petty ambitions, don't blame chance: it is not guilty of your self-satisfied incapacity . . . unless you wish to reproach it for your very existence.

*The COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG gazes at him with a smile of contemptuous indifference. Both appear, shimmering as if in the middle of a forge, at the center of unremitting reflections from the hearth, the torches, and the lightning.*

Yes. I know that in the eyes of most human beings nothing would seem to justify the sudden, shattering harshness of my words,

*With a curious smile.*

for, after all, to enjoy a hospitable feast, saying so, in high spirits, to your host, and toasting it with a joyous glass of wine—to speak lovingly of gentle women from afar—to delight, with sensual intoxication, in these sweet-smelling forest flowers—to make a flight of friendly words quiver, once or twice, with the pride of noble blood—to confess—even immodestly!—that one is hardly concerned with intricate concepts and illimitable thoughts—to recall, with the restrained courtesy invariably motivated by sympathetic interest, the possible destinies that a boy, exiled so young, would seem to have forgotten . . . are these crimes against hospitality? Why, then, have such subjects of conversation—so pleasant and attractive in themselves—suddenly become, for both of us, so . . . somber?

You assured me of your "family friendship," your "sincere understanding," your "unfailing devotion," your "warm assistance," your "experience in royal circles, which you put at my disposal," and heaven knows what else! joys, glorious loves, lights! . . . and laughing women at feasts! . . . All those words, so captivating because of the intrinsic images they are presumed to embody and magnificently effuse—yes, it is true, you spoke them! . . . and even wrapped them in the elegant style acquired from your brushes with courtiers.

*At this point, the COUNT OF AUERSPERG is forced to raise his*



## *The Exterminator*

*voice in order to be heard above the fearful and growing din of the storm.*

But under the veil of words—whatever the subject—no one ever conveys, evokes, or expresses anything but himself.

Therefore, conceived by you, imbued with your very being, penetrated by your voice, and as reflections of your mind, the things implied by those words, inherent in your nature and uttered by you, reached me as embodiments of your innermost presence, as so many effigies of yourself—struck in neutral sounds with a vibration unrelated to their meaning and belying it.

For those things, fictitiously enclosed in words which, by themselves, can only be virtual, seemed to me, as creations of your mind, to have no more than a self-styled identity with the things—of the same name—that would perhaps have charmed me by their vivid verbal illusion. How, indeed, is one to recognize them! Dry, repulsive, disturbing, chilling—thus hostile, on your lips, to the very names they seemed to usurp, that they might delude me—I felt them, in your assertions which are divested of their *real* images, as the impression of a cadaverous shamelessness of soul, as a veiled warning of constantly dissembled treachery. And since, to me, that threefold element makes up the inner air (which none but you can breathe) of your hybrid, ambiguous, extinct, and scheming entity, your words were no more than the echo of . . . blurred vocables, conveying nothing but the innate atrophy, within you, of the very things for which they aspired to awaken my desire. So that under the specious veils of your conversation, thus embellished with fine ghost-words, be assured that you alone—my dismal and multifaceted dinner guest!—did I see.

EASPAR OF AUERSPERG, *just barely frowning, but with a very pale face, continues to look at AXEL, his arms still folded, in silence.*

Yet, what did I care! Was I, after all, your judge! Was it

up to me to condemn you? to absolve you?—In fact, the time had come for the chamberlain to put on his chain once more, return to his . . . pleasures—to, in short, free my solitude of his insignificant shadow. My duty, bequeathed to me by my people, was therefore merely to hide from him completely the gravely cheering fact of his departure. That is why I was about to lead you to my threshold, with good will and best wishes for a fine journey. For me, you were just another visitor who had a right to the regard due the human shape. After all, one does hail the dead!

Suddenly, I noticed that you had made use of your leisure here—that you had detected one of the most important secrets of my house!

*At those words, THE COMMANDER winced, then looked at the COUNT OF AUERSPERG in amazement: he continues to seem somewhat bewildered, and is half gaping.*

THE COMMANDER, *to himself, with a shudder.* Ah! it's because of that! . . . Why—it's true then!

AXEL, *in a voice so harsh and hollow that at times it resembles the hoarse roar of a lion.* Really, there you raked up a burning ash. You should have neither inquired nor listened! It is unfortunate for you that you yielded to those temptations. You have lingered, in this dwelling, as a spy.—Being the dragon that guards my weighty secret, I object to your making it known. Besides, once I saw in your eyes that you plotted to murder me, ah yes! tonight—that you might more freely wither the whole great dream into some shady enterprise—I laughed to myself at your “departure,” knowing that I should catch you out. Yes, twice at table I detected that fine plan in your voice—the voice of a brilliant rascal—and, behind my listless mask, I was on the lookout for your contemptible thoughts.

## *The Exterminator*

**THE COMMANDER**, *clenching the pommel of his sword, and almost to himself.* What! This braggart here is planning to appropriate that whole dazzling mountain of gold! Let us, first of all, worry the soldiers.

*Recovering; then, with no transition, dryly and tensely.*

Such bombastic insults could hardly affect me. I have a sword in my hand—and soon . . . However, I should first like to consider the question on a somewhat lower level, if you please—since I notice, from your remarks, that you are acting illegally. You have inherited and are concealing here a lodgment of extensive national assets. Since you are already guilty, as regards the State, of having immobilized them for so long, any German may call upon you to restore those treasures to your country, my dear Count of Auersperg! Holding, in this case, means stealing.

**ATEL**, *after a moment of vague surprise.* Eh! . . . Now he's a stern judge! At table he spoke highly and passionately of those legendary lords of the highways whom he was proud to call "ancestors," and whose plundering he extolled. Now here he is, sermonizing us on integrity. What can this noble change of face mean?

**THE COMMANDER**, *with a cold smile.* My words were a test—fully justified, it would seem. So you have in mind seizing this lodgment that was entrusted to your honor as a son?

**ATEL.** And a while ago this upright adviser was accusing me of having never even tried to do just that. So that, too, was a test, was it?

**THE COMMANDER.** I dare you to prove that I'm slandering you, by restoring, as I say, to Germany . . .  
*He stops.*

*Axel*

AXEL, *smiling*. I dare *you* to finish your sentence!

THE COMMANDER, *biting his lips*. Oh! You are not obliged to do more than disclose officially . . .

AXEL, *after a shrug of the shoulders*. Just a moment ago, my duty was to *restore* not only what I don't possess but what may not even exist, as far as we know! Now—I have merely to *disclose*—and I am absolved.

The COUNT OF AUERSPERG, *before provoking, by a flagrant insult, an immediate engagement of swords, turns toward the three veterans, probably to give some final order*.

*Suddenly, having looked at them, he gives a start. . . .*

*Of course, the tone of the explosive indictment of the young lord made them tremble from holy shock, and in their confused minds they even sometimes mistook the claps of thunder for the steely intonation of the voice. How they hate the formidable adversary, with his cold eyes and bullying ways! Ah! No matter how furious the duel might turn out to be, they are full of blind faith in the final victory! . . . However, at THE COMMANDER's last words, a shadow fell across their loyal faces: an anxiety, which they had not dared admit for years, loomed large in their ever simple and straightforward consciences.*

*Indeed, since what had just been said was more within the grasp of their humble and untutored minds, it did seem to them to hide a grave truth—a truth they had always refrained from thinking about, out of respect for the infallible and inviolable honor of their young master. They look at each other: they would give their blood if only he would deign to answer.*

*That is why the COUNT OF AUERSPERG, who detected the glance, finally understands the obscure purpose of his adversary, whom he now looks upon with terrifying intensity.*

*And for a long minute, with the cyclone now in the distance, nothing can be heard in the high-ceilinged hall but the sound*



## *The Exterminator*

*of the torrential and constant rain crashing, in gusts, against the windows.*

*After a violent inner struggle.*

So be it! . . .

*Pointing at the old soldiers with his sword.*

It is for their sakes, for their sakes alone! do you understand? that I condescend to answer from that respectable "legal" point of view which you impose in your shady quibbling, like a small-town clerk, with a view to shocking these men. I, personally, am hardly apprehensive about the shadow of such fluttering of bats' wings.

You soldiers, who are our witnesses, place your torches in the lamp brackets on the wall—and be judges.

*He walks up to one of the chairs, sits down, and leans his right elbow on the table, which is still lighted; he holds his unsheathed swords straight out, between his crossed legs, resting his left hand on the pommel.*

*GOTTHOLD, MIKLAUS, and HARTWIG have obeyed. Now they are standing motionless, their right hands resting on their long swords.*

*UKKO comes and leans his elbows on the back of AXEL's chair.*

I claim that I have the RIGHT to act as I please here, as regards the details of my behavior for which I have just been admonished—and I agree, if you like, to be questioned.

*THE COMMANDER, impassive, sword in hand, and still standing at the back of the hall.* I was saying, sir, that your most obvious duty, right now and before any duel, is to inform the State you belong to and which, by protecting your heritage in this place, allows you to speak here as master. You are a subject of the State, and, as such, you should refer the matter to its chief treasurers, its rulers, or else those of its representatives who, sanctioning in its name the integrity of all, formulate it and are its deputies.

*Axel*

AXEL, *very coldly giving full value to each word*. Oh! If their kind, in the past, had not felt the need to have my father slaughtered, that they might recapture, underhandedly and for their very own profit, the Treasure that had been officially entrusted by them to his sword—and for which their treachery made his military reputation responsible—the remarkable assets of which you speak would have long been in legal hands. You forget that on this point I alone have the right to accuse! Now, the State—if those prominent men were its deputies—is answerable for that deed. Consequently, its Integrity (which they represent) lies dead, perjured, and void! nullified, in fact! at my door. . . . It is therefore quite legitimate that my ties of obligation to this creation of the mind—which are limited to the slanderous homicide for which I cannot be compensated—be somewhat slack.—That is why the gratitude I am supposed to feel for that gang of murderers hardly impels me, for conscience's sake, to devote . . . even a minute of my leisure . . . to drawing up the kind of "notifications" that would justify the blunder of the crime, to the joy of those fellow plotters.

THE COMMANDER, *calm*. What! Would it not, on the contrary, be a great opportunity for you to bring an action against the State itself, by making known the very plausible possibility that has come to the fore? What reason could you have for missing that opportunity?

AXEL, *in the same clipped and icy tone*. Since the State, on this point, has set some rather disconcerting examples—having ventured, again at my expense, to put an end to this matter, once and for all, with an arbitrary decree abrogating, with no appeal possible, even my right to accuse—I see no reason, whatever the situation, to inform it of more or less fanciful hypotheses . . . which it is no longer qualified to hear, to which it has forbidden itself to listen.

## *The Exterminator*

THE COMMANDER. You inherited an unfulfilled duty to all concerned.

Axel. Come now! Integrity has weakened your mind! No State—and, in this case, mine less than any other, I should think—can demand any more from a soldier who has died for his duty! Fulfilled or not, the obligation no longer exists: and the child of that soldier never inherited responsibility for the deceased's military service.

THE COMMANDER, *between loud claps of thunder*. There are certain exceptional and unforeseen cases when a gentleman is bound, by his nobility alone, to refer to his King, whose judgment alone is final.

Axel, *in a slow-paced, grave, and bitter voice*. You forget that he has already passed sentence. Who am I, in the King's own words? "The descendant of a man whose *equivocal and unaccountable incompetence* was responsible for the irretrievable loss of Germany's most substantial savings." A verdict based on appearances and arrived at without investigation (for a very good reason, indeed!), sullyng a name that sums up seven centuries of noble deeds.—Even assuming that this label which the King attached to our name does not release me from the respect due the daring majesty of a man who did not hesitate to offend me, I maintain that neither does it allow me, with any dignity, to notify him . . . of something that could never be more than an unofficial and confidential *secret*. For today that secret would take on the implicit nature of a formal contradiction of the judgment with which he dared to tarnish, heedlessly, the august memory of my father. And *on what* would that contradiction be based? On assumptions from so questionable a source as my very old steward, Herr Zacharias? . . . Ah! I say that even the most sensitive loyalty would in no way oblige me to take

the chance of appearing so unprofitably ridiculous. I have other ways of spending my time.

THE COMMANDER, *slowly*. What if I take note of it, since I can enlighten your King in a few restrained and serious words which would dispel the shadow that will be left on your father's name in history—do you object?

AXEL. What a semblance of irrelevant reasons! Even a bit of justifiably cautious reflection reveals their vanity. . . . Here, if you like—not in dreams, but in fact—are the alternatives, as far as my filial duty is concerned.

Assuming that after all the searching—carried out, at great expense, on the strength of a kind of dubious legend—these questionable riches were never found, my father's name would be the butt of angry taunts, reactions of frustrated greed, and even more slanderous suspicions, for especially with his death seen in this new light, the erroneous impression would become even more universal.

Assuming that the treasures were suddenly recovered, and given the fact that their discovery would lead to the most "awkward" scandal and the inevitable sully of the most "official" representatives of the public safety, confidence, and honor, here is a rough idea of what the Reason of State, which takes precedence over any equity in affairs of this type and which you ignore, would imperceptibly dictate to history: here is what posterity might learn:

"We still do not know what purpose the General of Auersperg, a few days before falling to the enemy, had in mind when—resorting to the most baffling and disconcerting precautions—he buried the enormous assets in question in the most secret and remotest of his domains. History could never establish the motives behind that concealment of Germany's funds. However, his son, Axel of Auersperg, by nobly restoring them to the State, has managed to compensate for his



## *The Exterminator*

father's erratic, and indeed strange, irresponsibility, which, for a time, had dimmed the hitherto untarnished blazon of that illustrious family."

Yes: such would be the dazzling bit of fame I should add to the memory of my heroic father. And my filial piety, which is more judicious than your advice, warns me that in such circumstances it would not EVEN be in the interest of my family to unearth this affair.

THE COMMANDER. And convincing yourself of those paradoxical subtleties, you conspicuously abstain from any action, thus giving your assent to the *fait accompli* of the error that weighs on those ashes? when a simple message to the Cabinet would, as I say—despite your unsubstantial expectations—restore all the past honor to your name, which is also my own.

ARIEL. Oh! my people, sir, never had need of anyone to decree our honor, considering that the country, which over the centuries was founded as a result of their deeds and those of our peers in the military seigniory, owes to us what is best of its own. . . . No one, therefore, would be qualified to question the honor of those whose vital function is to give real meaning to that of other men, and we pay little heed to the worthless opinion of those passersby (no matter how numerous they are assumed to be) who even once venture to dispute it. So there is no reason for me to take your last remarks into account. I am here in my ancestral house, a home of exile in a place of exile, since for me the country is merely a site. There is no reason for me to concern myself with what may be buried in the vicinity of this dwelling, since my father left me no word about it. Since no law compels me to attend to it, no one can challenge my RIGHT to disclaim any interest in it.

THE COMMANDER. Your father bequeathed to you even less the obligation of thus confiscating the welfare of several million

*Axel*

innocent people. Because you think you have a grievance against a few, you protect yourself with an omission in the Law in order that everyone may feel the weight of a resentment as impassioned as it is unjust.

AXEL, *smiling*. In truth, the least eloquent financier of the tiniest of Eastern States would, at this moment, merely look at you in silence: for it is surprising to hear a courtier display such extreme ignorance. If your ideas on the nature of gold are limited to that of spending it, they are not equal to eliciting an answer.

THE COMMANDER, *impassive, not understanding*. A solemnly stated pretext hardly affects one who protects the common good.

AXEL. The common good! A generous goal, proclaimed over the centuries, by which princely plunderers of all countries sanctioned their wanton exactions and which still allows them to extort the blessing of the plebes while at the same time coldly robbing them in the very name of their own good. No, I have no reason to invite the usual champions of the "common good" to come here and loot.

THE COMMANDER, *coldly*. Well! If, for such specious motives, you don't choose to take the initiative of warning the States concerned, let others take the responsibility, and soon you shall be relieved of that gold—for which you have no use and which is not yours.

AXEL, *calm and haughty*. Why, if I can help it, should I allow a thousand or two human beasts, in your pay, to arrive here suddenly and to desecrate, in their guffawing ways—at length and by sheer force—the only place of exile fit to bury the dignity of my life? I know that to men of the law it may

## *The Exterminator*

seem perfectly normal—in the name of that “general good,” whose fallacy I have just explained, and for the purpose of ostensibly recovering what may turn out to be imaginary gold—for columns of diggers to come and deface this land which cost the glorious blood of a whole race that culminates in me—and to ransack this ground which my people trod, from father to son, for centuries: what do sentimental allegations matter! I shall be indemnified, shan’t I, once these thousands of old trees are felled and uprooted—trees that, for me, are old friends? No. The silence of the great Forest—my province as a margrave—is not for sale: it is dearer to me than any words: it is my sacred property, from which I do not mean to be expropriated and for which all the gold in your banks would not compensate me. And even should it result in that alleged additional “well-being” of a million indifferent souls, I tell you that on the same scale those pebbles would worthlessly outweigh one precious stone—for such well-being would not balance, in real equity, the fraud I should suffer.

THE COMMANDER. Whom would you ever convince that such riches are not worth seeking, even at the price of all the silence in the world?

AYEL, *contemptuous*. Only myself: which is quite enough. As I even think I have proved long since, I hardly found it a difficult task. For example, it is highly conceivable that you would prefer Gold (even imaginary Gold) to all the silence in the world—since Silence means nothing to you but a yawn. Indeed, when you usurp the right to pronounce that word, it rings hollow and has not (although the syllables are the same) the shadow of a relation to the word I uttered just now. It is useless for you to try and give them the same value . . .

*Smiling.*

the act of a forger or a parrot.

*Axel*

THE COMMANDER, *impassive*. But still, if some note from your father suddenly turned up and you chanced to discover those great riches, what, then, would you consider your duty?

AXEL, *calmly*. To sink them even deeper into the earth, if I could, for love of the Poor.

THE COMMANDER, *after a pause*. You would soon give up such pranks, once you reached the age of discretion.

AXEL, *grave*. I doubt *you* will ever reach that age.

THE COMMANDER. I see. You consider yourself at liberty, it would seem, to distort, knowingly, the act of a man who deposited those national assets in this house merely to ensure that they be temporarily in safer keeping—before returning them, in full, to the authorities in Germany, when the time came!

AXEL. And it was his time that came, thanks to the authorities in Germany. So wherever they may be, here or elsewhere, what do I care! Let them lie! Surely, I may at least share everyone's right to know nothing about them. Because of the murderous duplicity of your agents, no one has any idea of what happened to your Gold: Germany has rendered invalid my legal rights of inquiry into the event that explains and that led to its disappearance: time has weighed heavy on what is now an old story . . . —so be it.

THE COMMANDER, *impassive*. In conclusion, you know the source of those riches which I am now convinced are buried on your land! Nullifying them in that way still means treating them as your own; what right to them can you claim to have?

AXEL. The right of safeguarding their oblivion.



## *The Exterminator*

THE COMMANDER. On what grounds?

ABEL, *rising, calm and somber*. On grounds warranted by the blood that covers them—and paid for them.

*After a rather long pause.*

I will nevertheless bring up a matter about which you have not questioned me. There are, in Germany, so many poor souls, whose starving distress—the work of all of you out there!—sickens anyone who looks at you—that it would be somewhat low to deny the right of assisting them—in the event that, for example, someone chanced to come upon the Gold of which we are speaking, ABSOLUTELY as a *lucky find*.

Indeed, obliterated from everyone's memory, nullified by official decrees, and waived by the indemnified owners, had a hundred years gone by, it would not, in truth, be any freer than it is today. What remains of it? A legend. If it still exists, its effigies would make of it a kind of blazoned mine—weltering somewhere under the Forest. This unclaimed wonder is thus at the mercy of some predestined creature who will be led to it by a decree of that Necessity which looks after man's fortunes. Yes, its *legal* heir will be the first traveler who, when the ground yields beneath his feet, will staggeringly grope his way down the passages ablaze with those dead riches. Why? Because he will receive the right of possession from Chance alone, the sole *owner* of them today.

Now then! no document has ever yielded to me the secret of that hollow site, vaulted in earth and in shadow, where the German imperial treasure lies dormant. My father never appeared to me to disclose its whereabouts. If, therefore, I chanced to come upon it, suddenly, without having even once been guilty of seeking it out—that is, if I found it in the capacity of a mere passerby—in the name of what exaggerated remorse or deceitful scruples would I shirk the royal duty of protecting its great value from the low uses by which so many living creatures would be bound, rashly, to profane

*Axel*

it? Why should I relegate to Fate—from which, after all, I accepted life!—the new and weighty gift it would thus apparently call upon me to dispense? I repeat that, having made no attempt to gain that legacy, knowing that it is here, I should feel it my bounden duty to possess myself of it, if it came to me from the depths of the Unknown. However vast it might then seem to me, in all its radiant horror, I claim that for me it would be—like the lost purse over which a pilgrim stumbles at night, on the road—when his eyes were yet gazing only at the stars!

THE COMMANDER. I, myself, have only one thought on the matter—that all the underground belongs to the State. If, therefore, having got wind of that grave secret, the State sent a few companies of miners and military pioneers here, you would indeed be obliged to let it recover its property, for those gangs of workmen would hardly be sensitive to the vain-glory of your words.

MIKLAUS, HARTWIG, *and* GOTTHOLD, *with a short, confident, and resounding laugh.* Oh, ho!

UKKO, *with a slight shrug of the shoulders.* A pity one is not inclined to laugh.

AXEL, *to* THE COMMANDER. A delusion! Not one pickax would break this ground, not one of those hapless souls would ever leave the vicinity. And . . . it is precisely in order to avoid the pestiferous emanations given off by their idle carnage that I prefer to kill only you.

THE COMMANDER. But no, I'm dreaming! You would attempt a rebellion against the Law? against the States? against the King?

## *The Exterminator*

**AXEL**, *gravely and with contempt*. I alone know what great perils and deadly traps are hidden and may suddenly emerge in this military Forest, which we have commanded for three centuries! Four or five hundred soldiers, dispatched to ravage this land, would not go twenty leagues through the woods, in the direction of this stronghold, without—through a simple mishap—being swallowed up by the ground they had covered, and made like the Gold they had come to seek. As a result: when such incidents thwart the beginnings of an undertaking that was vague and dubious to begin with, one puts off risking new ones for such perilous profits; time goes by, taken up in indecision, vain inquiries, endless commentaries: worried oblivion settles in. . . . In short, things would remain as they are, controlled by my covert will.

**THE COMMANDER**. Supposing you were fully aware of what a few hundred disciplined men—a thousand, if need be—could do were they led here prudently—would your conscience, then, coldly allow you to perpetrate such criminal madness?

**AXEL**, *smiling*. On this point I have nothing to account for and cannot accept being judged. Approbation, blame, or astonishment would find me equally insensitive; as regards my "conscience," I alone am qualified to deliberate, I decide—and there is nothing more to be said.

**THE COMMANDER**. Such shameless convictions are merely superhuman, sir—thus hardly worth considering.

**AXEL**, *standing up*. You are perfectly free to waste your time trying to think so. But since your grounds have been proved utterly worthless, the hearing is over—and we are not gripping the swords in our hands for the purpose of further discussion.

*Axel*

*Seeing the COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG smile at those words, he suddenly begins again—and as fiercely as before.*

Ah! One can see that, fortified by our sworn promise, you are blindly trusting in your skill with this weapon. My oath should have shown you what faith I, too, must have in my own, to want to consecrate, with the mysterious blood of a fair combat, my rights to silence and oblivion—especially when I might so easily annihilate you with no risk at all. Well, this I predict: that you will not escape my sword. Come, it is as though you were about to be struck by lightning. I am going to do away with you, but not in anger, rather as one pushes a stone out of one's path—without your death interrupting the progress of even one of my thoughts, which are loftier than the one now in question and not within the range of your understanding. You are nothingness, and I deny you, without fearing even a twinge of remorse. I bear you no grudge; I see you not. For me, you are inanimate: you are the eternal moth which, of its own accord, rushes up to destroy itself in the eternal flame.—And now, you have been warned. I have spoken.

THE COMMANDER, *to himself*. Oh! I want to learn more, before killing him!

*Aloud, coldly.*

You have amused me, and you have exhausted yourself: that is all your harangue has accomplished. To sum up: You wish to hide inordinate sums of money from various States of Germany and—I am hindering you. Very well. Given the circumstances, Count . . .

*He disdainfully drops his sword.*

. . . I will not fight. I have no intention of thus honoring thieves—even if they are my own kin.

AXEL, *calm and grave, in a loud voice*. If my far too helpful father had not, out of weariness, once granted you the



## *The Exterminator*

honor of touching his hand—and acknowledged you as kin (in a state of absent-minded forbearance, which for two hours has been protecting you)—I should have made short work of all that bad faith, impudent boasting, and hollow effrontery: let us have done with it.

*Quietly, and as if pointing out a very simple fact.*

My castle was the military key to one of Germany's border provinces. An imperial rescript invested the suzerain of this place with the right of meting out justice on all levels, even in peacetime.

*To UKKO, pointing to a rifle.*

Therefore, in the name of that hereditary mandate, take this weapon: aim at this man's heart and—if he does not pick up his sword at once—fire!

*UKKO rushes over to the wall, grabs the gun, cocks it, walks back and stands three steps away from THE COMMANDER, and swiftly takes aim.*

*THE COMMANDER, surprised and having turned paler.* Out there, in Prussia, everyone knows that I am here. So you will have to account for your acts and your words. To cover up for a murder, you plead, knowingly, a dead right, a feudal rank abrogated by disuse. You pretend to be unaware of what century we live in.

*AXEL, indifferent.* Oh! reckon that you date from tomorrow, if you like. I, myself, am.

*THE COMMANDER, twitching with cold rage.* Nonsense! It is you who speak only of yesterday, wanting in foresight regarding tomorrow. I am quite satisfied, sir, to be a man gifted with some reason and dating only from the century in which I live—of being merely a man of today.

*AXEL.* Then take care: it is late.

*Axel*

THE COMMANDER, *still controlling himself, but trembling, and almost inaudibly*. Here I am, forced to lay out this solemn fanatic myself, when, if an account of his remarks were given the King, a good handful of police, with simply a warrant for extradition, would come along straightaway, pinion him in this hovel, and carry him off, muzzled, to a dungeon!

UKKO, *in an undertone*. Give me the word, and I fire, my lord.

THE COMMANDER, *boldly folding his arms*. Well, then, go ahead and murder! Or, given your committed promise, answer, distinctly, this one last question: *Where am I and who are you?* Only this time, I beg you, be precise, exact, and clear. In society, we have a rather low opinion of phrase-makers.

AXEL, *after a gesture of impatience*. Here, we are far from preferring small-talkers. Ah! you dare to defy me to the point of demanding that I keep, for the sake of your curiosity, even *more* than my word!

*Somber.*

Well—be satisfied.

*To UKKO.*

Raise your gun for a moment. Three times this chamberlain has threatened us with his kings, his men at arms, and his peers—since the pride of this peacock is apparently limited to the keys embroidered on the tail of his peaceable uniform—really, it is enough to make one dizzy! So let him learn *where he is and who I am*—I swear he shall not have the time to forget it.

*He grasps his sword at the middle, walks over to THE COMMANDER, who is looking at him, his arms folded, and touches his shoulder with the hilt.*

You are in this unique Forest, whose darkness covers a hundred leagues. It is peopled by twenty thousand foresters, with dangerous rifles—old soldiers, born of a race that is

## *The Exterminator*

hereditarily faithful to me. I watch over it, at its center, in a very old stone dwelling that has already repelled three sieges.

From the edge of my moat to the distant skirts of the Forest, the villages and hamlets all communicate; it would take barely five days for all of them, together, to be informed of any order sent out from these walls. I should say, any notice! for, if one is loved at all, a notice counts more than an order, and in these woods the people's hearts have again become so wild that even you would not find a traitor among them. What would it matter anyhow! All unexpected arrivals, *in my direction*, whether consisting of one person or of several, are soon drawn to my attention—depending on the number, the foresters take the necessary precautions and stand guard at all the approaches. Once within the successive expanses of the Forest, how is one to live, to find one's bearings, to take shelter at night, and indeed, to move ahead, without being perceived? Deprived of my direct assistance—would you have reached me? No. Several days before you arrived here, the wind had, in fact, brought me the news that two horsemen . . .

*Suddenly stopping and looking at him with his limpid eyes.*  
and even a woman . . .

*A moment of silence. Then, to himself—and as if he had finally settled a doubt at the sight of THE COMMANDER'S impossibility.*

They don't know one another.

*Going back, coldly, to his interrupted sentence.*

. . . were making their way to my dwelling. They were followed, spied upon, listened to. I therefore sent you the guides who led you to my threshold in less than six days. Just now you spoke of a "picket of police," dispatched to this stronghold, to lay hands on my person? . . . What would soon be left of them, under the boughs, at my own discretion—if, on the contrary, I did not have them led, in their turn, to my drawbridge—lowered, for them, in the King's name? I will

tell you! They would enter—as if taking command, no doubt—into the military courtyard of my castle. . . . Then, without even disturbing one of my retainers . . .

*He walks over to one of the casement windows, opens it, and with one blow on his hunting whistle, pierces the shadow and the noise of the downpour.*

*Horrible baying, mixed with the clashing of chains, reverberates; one can make out the impact of bodies flinging themselves against a massive door.*

. . . Yes, I have there—do you hear?—some thirty Ulm mastiffs, of that great tawny breed, war dogs. Since the ferocious pack obeys no one but me, it is useful for night hunting: it constantly beats my surrounding countryside, in the Forest. In a very few minutes it would leave nothing of your men, on the grass and the paving stones, but bloody bones. Of course, I should highly deplore such an event—one so unexpectedly sudden—and one I would not have had the time to avert—nor even the time to learn the *object* of the delegation! And I would chide my dogs, officially, in front of the whole staff of this castle, for I have no wish to be considered a rebel! . . . I think, however, that after two or three such mishaps, I should no longer be sent that type of visitor. So enough of those childish threats which these old soldiers and this boy find laughable.

At the slightest indication, at the merest sign of assassins sent out against me—who, as I said, would doubtless perish in some ravine before they had gone very far—I would take the offensive, for I should thereupon have to consider the Princes who would act toward me in that way as mere aggressors in a duel in which the weapon of their choice was murder. No, there would be no reason for me to refuse the favorite weapon of such kings. Besides, wouldn't they be the sons of those leaders of all the dynasties who, one day in the remote Past, also rebelled against their sovereigns and supplanted them? Showing myself equal to their forefathers in



## *The Exterminator*

nature (at least in this regard), I should make every effort to thus prove myself worthy of the *honor* they do me, unconsciously or not.

In truth, here I can count on a few reliable shots. I have at hand, throughout the Forest, a good number of miners—with strong arms and hard faces—who remember the servitude they suffered in the army, when they were young, and whose shoulders are still marked by scars that have not altogether healed over the years. No one but myself alone can fully realize what old and very chilling resentment hardens in their veins when, with pickaxes clenched in their fists, they vanish down the deep underground tunnels, remembering your amiable Princes. To be sent as executioners to some capital, and to await the one opportunity among many for hitting a king with a live and well-aimed bullet, would for them be true rapture, the only rapture for which they thirst to such an extent—that they would willingly pay your hangmen's normal price to slake it. You will agree that I still have enough gold to meet any expenses they might have in such an undertaking—and that, as a whole, a “regicide,” as they say in the cities, would even be so subtly conceived by me that their safe return could be taken for granted. I therefore have every reason to believe that after two or three such warnings and coincidences, the august successors of my crowned antagonists would no longer disturb my solitude . . . and all the more so in that, with my ruthless perseverance, I should not be the first to tire.

Let us assume now (shouldn't all possibilities be considered?) that at the suggestion of advisers like you, some leader of one of Germany's “countries,” irritated, in the long run, by several costly and threatening failures, and unable to tolerate the constant humiliation of not having his own strict orders carried out—also, perhaps, growing suspicious of those “outrageous” facts and beginning to distrust, in a more thoughtful way, not only me but my uncommunicative as-

sociates—let us assume, as I say—since, after all, one could hardly imagine to what lengths a Prince might be led by his “indignation”!—that this lawful king were suddenly to send forces of some consequence, eight or ten thousand men, for example, commissioned to occupy militarily the Black Forest, to raze my walls to the ground, and to take me dead or alive! All of this only so that “Law may prevail.”

In the name of man’s Rights, I declare that to wage war on a solitary exile, guilty of little more than legitimate self-defense, silence, and freedom—quite determined, in any case, to safeguard his isolation to the point of blowing himself up rather than surrender—yes, I claim that waging war on that man would be an act deserving of history’s mockery and the world’s contempt—and would do no honor to the country.

But no matter! . . . Thanks to those of my people who—over the years, with the hereditary patience I am displaying at this moment—armed my stronghold, I am ready to defy those bellicose fancies. Belonging to a race of soldiers and knowing the precise stretch of land that a body of ten thousand men, divided into columns of shock, attack, and support, can occupy *here*, my arrangements have long been made.

COUNT AXEL OF AUERSPERG *comes back and sits down in the same position as before, leaning his elbows near the lights on the table. The din of the thunder and the circumvolutions of the torrential storm have seemed, for the last few minutes, to draw nearer, closing in on the heights of the burg as if for a crowning embrace.*

First of all, you will learn that the mountainous and wooded country surrounding me would defy any advance of artillery: indeed, on all sides, into the far reaches, there are wide, circular valleys, torrential rivers, myriad rocks—and huge trees so close together that, were they sawed down at the roots, they would necessarily lean against one another without falling: could they fall, they would block any army on the march. Using cannon in the depths of such country, with

## *The Exterminator*

a view to running me down, would, in truth, demand very heavy—and very sterile—sacrifices of blood, time, and gold . . . merely to suffer being repelled. No cavalry could stir in this region—for the military maps, rectified from generation to generation in accordance with current practices, are in my hands *alone*; I might add that I should not await a sudden invasion of enemy regiments to become acquainted with them. Other means would thus be necessary for attacking me. Large companies of foot soldiers venturing into this exceptional Forest would alone *give the impression* of being able to reach, although with difficulty and in confusion, the approaches to my moats out there—in other words, they would be under constant and direct fire, before arriving at the walls.

For the forgotten battlements of this stronghold were, in times past, equipped with forty-eight siege guns, oh! still absolutely shining, and if the order went out, they would be manned by a garrison of tough veterans, who are well able to wield them. From the heights of this fortress, their strong, driving fire covers an area of more than two leagues, and the soil of that area is constantly conditioned to provide, on this side of the trenches, very adequate resources of bread, victuals, water, even ammunition. As for my casemates, their storerooms are always, as in the past, well stocked for long resistance—thus accounting for my relative poverty, of which I am proud.

That is why no act of authority on my part, betraying my true power, would ever give me away as being openly rebellious, should the enemy approach.—Nothing. The endless stretches of trees, bogs, precipices, and ditches would preserve their aspect of rusticity—and then of wilderness—and as the first lines of infantry passed through, they would hear nothing, from village to village, but the rope-maker's wheel, the woodman's ax, the clog-maker's peaceful hammer, the babbling of brooks, and the sweet sounds of lullabies. Nothing would betray resistance or danger. I should take, according to

the paths chosen, just some few new measures, from here in the manor, within a radius of five or six leagues from my trenches. Indeed, why mobilize those whom I might call my people, before the precise moment when, having perforce been attacked themselves, the Forest becomes more darkly threatening? As soon as the first burg was molested by unexpected troops, all of them, of their own accord, would withdraw here! For in the Forest we have methods of defense that are altogether unknown to your soldiers and that would overpower and, indeed, crush them—of that I can be absolutely certain! So that, suddenly, some dark night, while your thousands of men were fast asleep, the glades would become furnaces, and in the stifling atmosphere of the blazing woods, the bursts of exploding mines would be mingled with the crackling of thousands of rifles, and the dawn would rise on plain and unceasing butchery. In winter my defense would be even easier and more dreadful: for within these lands, which have been worked for long centuries, I am in command of innumerable burial techniques—and since I can turn to account those millions of combatants that never retreat, called trees, I know how forces can be starved, crumbled, neutralized . . . forces, moreover, that in every respect would be far from measuring up to those I should have under my command. Even were we to simulate defeat, there are two paths that could lead the shock troops all the way to my verdant plateaus and my moat: from the summit, not only can I push down huge round rocks which would inevitably crush them, but given the old underground shelters that run along those paths, with a few blasts I can collapse the ground to the extent of sloping them in such a way . . . that this old keep would be altogether impregnable—and the gunfire from it would then complete the job. I should find it fanciful to wish to determine the number of fugitives—with neither shelter, guides, nor food, lost in the woods, and hunted down for the kill by my people—who would try to reach the skirts of the



## *The Exterminator*

Forest, that they might inform their country of the alarming disaster.—This one would soon be followed by the sudden attack of some neighboring fortified city, by a summons to the discontented seigniories, and, without any doubt, by civil war in Germany. After one or two combats fought in accordance with an already well-thought-out plan of battle, I know which culprit I should do away with. My RIGHT would remain intact; for . . . would it have been I who had made myself an outlaw?

Now you know the *place*, Mr. Chamberlain. As for "*me*," I am quite simply a dreamer with whom it is rather difficult to deal and whom it might not be wise of your kings to defy. And now (this time, you would agree, putting an end to our exchange of words) you have, I imagine, heard of . . . a young man, in the days of yore, who, from the heart of his fortress of Alamut, built on the Syrian plateau called the "Roof of the World," obliged distant kings to pay him tribute? He was called, I believe, the Old Man of the Mountain? Well . . .

*At a gesture from him, GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS have again taken hold of their torches; AXEL stands up; then, illuminated by the red reflections of the entire hall, looking at his adversary, and in a calm voice.*

... well, *I am the Old Man of the Forest.*

**THE COMMANDER**, *somewhat haggard, but now grave, eyeing him from head to foot, as if to put on a bold front. Rebel! You dare to take—such rights! . . .*

**AXEL**, *his eyes aflame.* The only rights anyone has ever had are those he took—and knew how to keep. And let me tell you this: I plan to take them all! at the first maneuver from . . . your masters.

**THE COMMANDER**, *observing him, and in an undertone.* Since you can become king, why not do so?

*Axel*

AXEL, *pointing, with his sword, to the sword lying on the floor.*

I have other worries.

*A complete hush.*

THE COMMANDER, *with a cold and wan smile, and as if resigning himself to his fate.* Clearly, you can do anything you like with me! All right, then! Let's cut each other's throats.

*He bends down and picks up his sword; then, in a strange voice.*

It would be more proper, I think, to remove our coats.

AXEL, *without even noticing the low and distrustful sense of the words.* Granted.

*Both of them, having stuck their swords into the floor, hastily strip to the waist, throwing their clothes onto the two chairs. Their muscles are now visible: those of the COUNT OF AUERSPERG, lithe, athletic, sinuous; those of THE COMMANDER, sturdy, agile, resistant. Grasping their swords again, they move apart, about five or six paces from each other, in the middle of the hall.*

THE COMMANDER, *in a firm and clipped voice.* You soldiers, who are wearing the Iron Cross, I, Hermann Kaspar of Auersperg, Baron of His Majesty the King, Commander of the order of our Red Eagle, I take you as witnesses to the fact that I have protested against the arbitrary behavior of Count Axel of Auersperg, my cousin, who, having, with regard to me, exceeded all bounds with his threats, boasting, and flagrant insults, has made it urgently and absolutely necessary for me . . . to make an attempt on his life.

*With a glance round the hall, he examines the dueling ground.*

AXEL, *in an undertone and smiling.* Lofty words: What about action?

THE COMMANDER, *his sword high.* This time I await you, sir.

## *The Exterminator*

**AXEL**, calm, taking his guard. Here I am.

The two adversaries, moving swiftly toward one another, have engaged only the points of their blades. The attacks of the **COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG** come in quick succession, as he lunges with exceptional speed. **AXEL**, haughty, has clashed swords so many times and with such hard parrying that sparks fly. And, so, a few minutes go by.

Now the swords, forewarned and as though they had appraised each other, no longer meet. Outwitting one another, with close feints, each can predict the other's moves and they avoid each other. They seem like two quivering flashes of light, constantly approaching and shimmering under the torches, as they intertwine without any visible contact, almost noiselessly. Spontaneously, two deadly-looking thrusts, but met in the same flash by the young **COUNT**'s close guard, are made at him with lightning speed. **AXEL**, since the blades have been crossed, has not yet once stretched out his arm. Outside, continual claps of thunder.

**THE COMMANDER**, to himself, stepping back a bit, and as though struck by grim surprise. Eh! but . . . I have the feeling—I am lost.

**GOTTHOLD**'s eyes, worried until then, have followed the duel and read into the complexities of the feints. They light up as they see the **COUNT OF AUERSPERG** sharply move up a pace, as **THE COMMANDER** steps back, and show less front in a way that no doubt means something to the old soldier. **UKKO** looks on, his arms folded, and very pale, beside **MIKLAUS**, whose torch is trembling; at the back of the hall, **HARTWIG**, his hand clenched on his sword, has closed his eyes, for a tear of anguish has just spurted out and rolled down his moustache.

However, the opponent's attacks on **AXEL**—skillful, precise, the point tracing hardly visible patterns, with threatening flashes, aiming high and low—become more frequent: **AXEL**

## *Axel*

*stands like a rock in the shelter of his moving wrist, making a barrier with his impenetrable sword.*

*Suddenly, having avoided a pass—which was wide momentarily, owing to a shade of angry fatigue on THE COMMANDER's part—AXEL, with the terrifying stretch of a wild beast, counters with a lunge, his arm and sword thrust straight out horizontally: all at once, drops of blood fly in the air between the duelers. COMMANDER KASPAR OF AUERSPERG utters a short, hoarse cry, which he chokes down and stifles; he whirls round, thrashes about with both arms, letting his sword slip from his fingers, and then staggers: his knees give way; he falls forward, on his outstretched hands; soon, face to the floor, after a convulsion, he lies motionless; within three seconds a large red pool forms and spreads at his left side.*

*UKKO, who has rushed up, raised him, and then turned round, fingers the wound. His heart is run through. It's all over. A pause.*

*AXEL, to himself, thoughtful, and gazing at his now inert adversary. Passerby—you have passed away. Here you are, sinking deep into the Unthinkable. In your hidebound self-importance, the only instincts you refined during your lifetime were of an animal nature that was proof against any divine selection! Nothing ever called you from beyond the world! And you fulfilled yourself. You fall into the heart of Death like a stone in a vacuum—with no attraction and no purpose. The speed of such a fall, multiplied only by the ideal weight, is so . . . immeasurable . . . that, in fact, the stone is no longer anywhere. Disappear, then, even from between my eyebrows. Haughty, and turning toward the three soldiers.*

*Approach.*

*GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS draw near: bent under their torches, they look at the body stretched out on the floor. UKKO, with*



## *The Exterminator*

*bloody hands, supports the livid face on his knee. HARTWIG has rushed up from the back of the hall and also looks on.*

*The long, unsheathed swords shine around the dead man.*

Thank you, old friends, for the anxiety you suffered out of love for me! Do reassure Herr Zacharias.

*Pointing to the* COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG's *body.*

To the vaults, near the burial ground—this very night!

GOTTHOLD, in AXEL's ear, and guarding his words with one hand because of deafening thunderbolts, which are now probably striking the top of the keep. A grave is ready, my lord: it was yours—dug in accordance with your express wish, back in the past. . . .

AXEL, *impassive.* So be it: ashes for ashes.

*He drops his half-reddened sword.*

*A few minutes ago the arched door at the top of the stairway silently opened, disclosing someone unknown.*

*The newcomer is of a tall and admirably proportioned build. His countenance, with its pure features, seems not to belong to our centuries or our countries; it strangely resembles those hieratic or royal effigies in relief on the very ancient medals of the Medes. He appears to be in his fiftieth year, although the radiance of his grave eyes bears witness to a kind of powerful and eternal youth of body. The austere beauty of his whole person, the luminous pallor of his face, and the magnificent expression in his eyes seem as though they must forever oppress the memory of even those who had gazed upon him but once.*

*His brown wavy hair, mixed with just a few silver strands—and only slightly longer than is customary in the army—falls on either side of a mysterious brow, so splendid as to provoke recollection. His brown beard recalls those of the figures one finds engraved on Ninevite bronzes. He is illuminated by the lightning.*

*Axel*

*His costume, almost a black uniform, with no sword, appears at first to be that of the Hungarian military doctors; but several details, of the strictest simplicity, would indicate, rather, that it was the garment of a horseman ever ready for long journeys—a garment that would be adequately completed by a wide-brimmed felt hat and a cloak.*

*When he descends into the hall, GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS, helped by UKKO, have already lifted the lifeless body of the COMMANDER OF AUERSPERG, and preceded by HARTWIG, whose torch lights their way, they move off toward the main door. The COUNT OF AUERSPERG has just picked up his clothes, and as he finishes belting his brownish leather jerkin, he sees the unknown character, now on the bottom steps.*

*AXEL, to himself. Master Janus!*

*A pause; then, with a deep sigh.*

*Ah! I can feel myself again becoming merely a man, in the presence of this living creature.*

PART THREE

---

THE WORLD OF THE OCCULT

---

*Greet your thoughts as  
guests, and your desires as children.*

LAO-TSE

## ON THE THRESHOLD



*The same hall.*

### SCENE I

AXEL, MASTER JANUS

AXEL, *preoccupied and somber*. Master, I have killed a *man*.

MASTER JANUS, *lighting one of the ancient clay lamps*. So be it.

AXEL, *in an undertone, almost to himself*. For a secret . . . of which I know nothing—that yesterday I had forgotten—and that for an hour has been obsessing me—overwhelming me with an interest in it from which I thought I had freed myself.

*He opens a folio on one of the workbenches. Having tried to read.*

My soul is so listless I find the words strange—words that have so often dazzled me by their glow. The worst has happened! Something has transpired that has called me back to earth. I feel it within me, I want to live! . . .

MASTER JANUS, *to himself, looking at AXEL in the lamplight*. So you are now ripe for the supreme Ordeal. The vapor of Blood shed for Gold has just diminished your being: its fatal fumes enfold you, penetrating your heart—and under their pestilential influence, you are merely a child who knows words. As heir to the instincts of the man you have killed, the old thirst for pleasure, power, and pride, inhaled and reabsorbed in your organism, takes fire in the reddest of your veins. Now, down again from the holy threshold, the mortal that you were



will come back to life in the unrecognizable eyes of the guilty Initiate. The time is come. She, too, will be here, she who renounced the Divine ideal for the secret of the Gold, as you will shortly renounce your sublime finalities for that contemptible secret. Here, then, is the confrontation, the final duality of two races chosen by me in the remotest past, that the twofold illusion of Gold and Love might be vanquished by simple and virginal Mankind—in other words, that, in the point of Becoming, the virtue of a new Sign might be founded.

*AXEL, to himself, in an undertone.* I find that I am awakening from a chaste and pale dream, enveloped in ether the color of diamonds—whose memory will soon grow dim. Until now I had seen only the light of that world of wonders revealed to me by this man: at present I see all its shadows. A huge doubt assails me. . . . Life calls to my youth, stronger than those thoughts that were too pure for the fire that dominates me! I was shocked by that death . . . the blood, perhaps . . . No matter! I want to break this chain and taste of life! . . .

*He dreams.*

I will thus have spent my youth in this remote castle, becoming wild as the regions around it—so wonderful a sage as Janus will have brought me up more magnificently than kings, invested with a terrible power, but only defensive. I command in this awesome Forest. I now feel my heart leap toward those countries, gardens of the world, their banks reflected in Oriental seas, toward those palaces with marble chambers where white enchanted princesses sit fanning themselves—and, a lord out of the Hindu tales, not knowing where his treasures lie, I can see myself condemned to languishing within these walls, hunting down beasts of the woods to beguile my despair! No! Even if I must resort to those practices of hell which at least shatter the obstacles and destroy the obscure secrets, I will discover that fulgurant

*Axel*

gold! . . . To remain ignorant of it any longer . . . would be enough to make one jump off a precipice.

MASTER JANUS, *who has read AXEL's mind*. It was not worth being born.

AXEL *as if coming to a decision, after having looked at him*.

Master, I know that according to the ancient doctrine, in order to become all-powerful, one must, within oneself, conquer all passion, forget all covetous desire, destroy all human traces—and subdue through detachment. Man, if you stop setting limits to one thing within you—that is, stop desiring it—if, in that way, you withdraw from it, it will come to you, feminine, as water will fill the place offered it in the hollow of a hand. For you possess the real being of all things in your sheer will, and you are the god that you can become. Yes, such is the dogma and the first arcanum of true Knowledge.

Well, it means paying too high a price for nothingness: I am a man; I do not wish to become a stone statue.

MASTER JANUS. As you like: however, the universe bows down only before statues.

AXEL. What, then, would power be worth to me?

MASTER JANUS. So you really prize your self highly?

AXEL, *somber*. Ah! since I have not yet passed through the somber gates, I am beginning to dread a visionary world—in which all my thoughts could wander in some vain madness.

MASTER JANUS. The river is afraid of becoming the sea—by losing itself in it.

*On the Threshold*

**AXEL.** No. The goal is not worth the way. What! make the ultimate sacrifice, that in Death one may perhaps find dreamless Sleep? the Void? . . . Ah! I have real doubts—about the gods!

**MASTER JANUS.** The gods are those who never doubt. Escape from yourself, as they do, through faith in the Increate. Fill yourself in your astral light! Rise! Reap! Climb! Become your own flower! You are merely what you think: think, then, that you are eternal. Do not waste the hour doubting the door that opens or the moments that you chose from the beginning and that still lie before you. Do you not feel your imperishable being shine beyond all doubts, beyond all the nights?

**AXEL.** And if Death destroys my memory altogether?

**MASTER JANUS.** Your memory? And even now, do you remember yesterday? Is what happens or changes worth recalling? What, after all, would you wish to remember?

**AXEL.** Tendencies resulting from an obscure past are perhaps a memory: yet who assures me that I shall persist, aware of myself, in the sovereign sea of numbers, species, and forms?

**MASTER JANUS.** Know, even now, how to acquire the power of becoming that which threatens you in the Beyond: make yourself like the avalanche, which is no more than what it sweeps along in its way.

**AXEL.** And according to you, what *definite* impulse would centralize, in my being—the very being of those contrary forces?

**MASTER JANUS.** Spiritualize your body: sublimate yourself.

*Suddenly, making a fearful noise, a thunderbolt breaks one of the casement windows and, with a huge flash, crashes into*

*Axel*

*the hall in drops of fire. It wanders over the suits of armor and the objects on the wall, then rushes toward the hearth, streaks it, and disappears.*

AXEL, *after a moment.* Look, Master! How can one take a thought seriously—which that miserable flash of lightning could interrupt forever by annihilating my being.

MASTER JANUS, *impassive.* Your *being*, no: your *becoming*, that beggar's bag! A grain of sand could do it as well. And you hesitate to shake off that subjection, to free yourself from it? *While talking, MASTER JANUS had turned toward the shattered window and looked out at the dark and dismal atmosphere.*

*Now the air has become blue, bright, and luminous: the rain has stopped; the distant clamor is dying down, as if the storm had resolved itself into that last clap of thunder. The night has become serene: a calm enchantment pervades the woods.*

AXEL *looks in astonishment at the very sudden peace that has descended on the night outside. Then he silently walks over to the hearth, sits down, and his eyes fall upon the glow of the lamp lighted by MASTER JANUS.*

AXEL. What strange rays are shed by that lamp! It is the old Isaian lamp found in Palestine by the Rosicrucians? *Thoughtful.*

This flame, now watching me, perhaps shed light on Solomon.

*He meditates for a few minutes.*

Solomon! The name awakens worlds of dreams within me! Ah! Who will allow that I may discover the Ring! such as it glowed, in the unknown sepulcher of the Prince of the Magi, somewhere in the East!

MASTER JANUS. Solomon's tomb is the very breast of he who can conceive of the Increate Light.



*On the Threshold*

AXEL. All men simply call the Increate Light by the name of God.

MASTER JANUS. If you do not understand the meaning of certain words, you shall perish, quite simply, in the air around me: your lungs will never stand its stifling weight.—I do not teach: I awaken.—If while you were wailing in your swaddling clothes, your eyes, under closed lids, were not struck with that *Light* which penetrates, acknowledges, and reflects the substantial Spirit of things, the spirit of universality among things, I cannot give you those eyes. If yours are alive and if your feet are free, observe and go forward. One must initiate oneself.

AXEL, *leaning on his elbows—and smiling with melancholy.*

And . . . shall I then become as those magicians of the folk tales, whose genii shook torches under the earth and cast light on jumbles of jewels? Should I be able to transmute metals, like Hermes? use magnets, like Paracelsus? Raise the dead, like Apollonius of Tyana? Shall I too find pentacles against Fateful Circumstances and the Terrors of the Night? electuaries that compel or destroy love? the Magistry of the sun, with which one governs the elements? the Elixir of long life? or like Ramon Lull, the Powder of projection? like the Cosmopolite, the Philosopher's Stone! Shall I be like the magi of the great legend?

MASTER JANUS, *impassive, his foot against the pool of blood.* The true "Magi" never leave their names in the memories of passersby and are forever unknown to them. They have, for ages, been the same in number: but they form one single spirit. The dreamers you just named were useful, were wise mortals. They were not the Liberated. If the true Magi scorn living—they also dispense with dying.

*Axel*

AXEL, *with a start*. What, then, is a magus?

MASTER JANUS, *with a vague familiar smile*. If you really wish to know—the very thing you ask—first consider this simple and mysterious question. *Why did it never even occur to you that I, too, might have been threatened by the danger in this hall just a while ago?*

AXEL, *surprised and thoughtful*. True! . . . Might you be . . . ?

MASTER JANUS, *curt*. I am a man who stands before you. As for those words, unearthed from the old Hermetic language and which you take pleasure in reciting, they captivate your youthful intelligence far more by the sparkle of their sounds than by their meaning. All they suggest to you are cerebral sensualities. You are at an age when the twinkling of the stars constantly screens the feeling of the Sky. Forget, rather, the expressions that, on your lips, are purely verbal, and whose living meaning you cannot yet understand. Do not play with them. Every one of your words floats around for a bit and then . . . leaves you.

*He walks over to the broken window and opens it as a man might thrust aside a veil, then, pointing to the stilled air and the stars.*

Look, rather, at the heavens! Where there are no heavens, there are no wings! Transfigure yourself in their silent light: dream of developing in meditation and of purifying, in the fire of ordeals and sacrifices, the infinite influx of your will! of becoming an adept in the Science of the strong; of being no more than an intelligence freed from the desires and bonds of the moment, with a view to the supra-eternal Law.

AXEL, *with a kind of inner discouragement*. Who can know the Law?

## *On the Threshold*

MASTER JANUS. Who can know anything but what he recognizes? You think you are learning; you are, in fact, rediscovering what you already know: the universe is merely a pretext for that expansion of consciousness. The Law is the energy of all things! it is the living, free, and substantial Notion which, in the Sentient and the Invisible, stirs, animates, immobilizes, or transforms the totality of becomings. Everything throbs with it! To exist means to weaken or strengthen it within oneself and, with each pulsation, to realize oneself in the result of the fulfilled choice.—You spring from the Immemorial and are incarnated here, under veils of organic life, in a prison of relations. If you are attracted by the magnets of Desire, the original drawing force, and yield to them, you thicken the piercing bonds that encompass you. Sensation entertained by your mind will change your nerves into leaden chains! And all that old Externality, evil, complicated, and inflexible—which lies in wait for you, that it may feed on the live-volition of your entity—will soon sow you, as precious and conscious dust, in its chemical transformations and contingencies, with the conclusive hand of Death. Death means having chosen. It is the Impersonal, it is to have Become.

### *Silence.*

Is some obscure tendency still urging you to recapture the truth of your beginnings? Espouse, within yourself, the destruction of Nature. Resist its deadly magnets. Be privation! Renounce! Liberate yourself! Be your own victim! Consecrate yourself in the blazing love of the august Science, that you may die, as an ascetic, the death of phoenixes. Thus reflecting on the Law, the essential worth of your lifetime, every moment of it, imbued with its refraction, will participate in its everlastingness. Thus you shall destroy all bonds within you and around you! And forever oblivious of what was once the illusion of yourself, having vanquished the idea—finally free—of your being, you shall become, in the Intemporal—your

*Axel*

spirit purified—a separate essence within the Absolute Spirit—indeed, the very consort of what you call Deity.

AXEL, *to himself, not speaking*. I am a poor king. If the splendor of my father's treasure were disclosed to me, I could choose in freedom—but no! I cannot even be said to have sacrificed: Fate forces me to live on dreams.

MASTER JANUS, *who has read AXEL's mind*. And what would you wish to live on? What do the living live on if not mirages—vile hopes, forever deceived? Who, then, is free—the man who can choose? No, he alone is free who, having opted *forever*—thus no longer able to fail—is no longer driven to hesitate. Freedom, in fact, is but deliverance. To complain about the absence of danger is to acknowledge the possibility of slavery: it thus means inviting temptation: merely condescending to that means yielding. You have just had an earthly thought.

AXEL, *abruptly*. And what if I were a man for a moment? The earth is beautiful! In my young veins flows flaming blood. The great crime of loving and living! And you, who think me lost, remember: all things return to their native cause! On whatever side I tip the torch, the flame, remembering its nature, will strain toward the Heavens.

MASTER JANUS. Each time you “love,” you die to that degree. If you do not, at one go, cast off all mercy for the attractions of clay, your spirit, heavier as each dream is fulfilled, will be imbued with Instinct, will be enchained in Gravity, and once your time has come—a sport, in the Impersonal, of all the winds of Limitation, and strewn about, your consciousness scattered among your former desires, those vain sparks—you are strictly lost. So do not ever again project the sum of your actions and thoughts on anything but the Increate Light.



## *On the Threshold*

**AXEL.** I want a moment of oblivion. I have the right. . . .

**MASTER JANUS.** Will you recall a moment more easily than a century, in the eternal? How is one to be distinguished from the other? Each of the moments of your shifting actuality is projected, by you, circularly and forever. You will find it orbicular, infinitized within yourself. Your personality is no more than a debt you must discharge to its last fiber, to its last sensation, if you would reclaim yourself from the vast misery of Becoming.

**AXEL.** Ah! But the wise man may take a holiday from his Wisdom!

**MASTER JANUS.** Only a madman could dream of fleeing what he loves.

**AXEL.** But I have earned the right to breathe on the mountain before going on! Allow me to look at what I forsake, if only as a farewell.

**MASTER JANUS.** Once a truly noble mind—in other words, one that cleaves the intellectual ether of its divine assumption—asks permission to stop, to fall, would it be intelligible to itself? It is essentially too late, in your evolution, for such shadows of unreal concepts, enveloped in auras of unawareness, in which the vitality of the word is denied. He who stops on the threshold and turns away, proud of the steps he has climbed, is perceived by, and climbs down again in, his own eyes, however vacant those eyes had been, and he can measure his fall by the very pride he once felt in his now illusory elevation.

**AXEL.** I can give myself up to the flow of my passions without being led by them, like a swimmer in a river.

*Axel*

MASTER JANUS. Swimming *that* torrent upstream is impossible: do not lie to yourself, tempted heart! No one but the Liberated can stay behind, grazing the earth, and yet remain in the Heavens—as a ray of sun may wander here below, giving life to the earth with its beneficent warmth—and still be a part of its celestial birthplace. Become a creature of light, before defying . . .

*With a slight smile.*

*our* twilights.

AXEL. I am wrapped, I tell you, in the cloak of Apollonius! I have the Lamp—and the holy Staff as well, to steady the long course! What good would all the vigils, the learning—all those thoughts, alas!—have been if I had not even acquired the power to repress . . .

MASTER JANUS. Here you are being the hypocrite of your own hopes. Around a sensual body, the Cloak frays, becomes threadbare, and wears into holes, letting in the wind of the tombs; in the left hand of the Unchaste, the Lamp flickers and grows dim, ready to go out: in the right hand of the Initiate who withdraws, the supporting Staff grows lighter and becomes a branch of dead wood. Taking advantage of the immunity of a spiritual credit, that one may commit lower deeds with impunity, is that being worthy? If your mind is vested with a saintly strength and glow, you must forever stop complacently allowing such thoughts to enter it. You infuse each of your ideas—even such trifling ones—with a part of your being, and each idea, by that very fact, becomes one of the virtual moments of the future Appearance begot by your life and which Death will force you to incorporate. For entities vibrate in the infinite gestation of the whole which informs them, and Death brings one into the Absolute world. Your existence is merely the agitation of your being in the occult uterus, where your final future—your conclu-

## *On the Threshold*

sive conception—the obligation of winning yourself back from the world—is fashioned.

**AXEL.** A heavy obligation!

**MASTER JANUS.** If you want to lighten it, you pervert it: you violate it. Do you hope to come to terms with the boundless and to hesitate, undecided, in your obligation, without defining yourself within your own anguish? What, then, would the disciplinary practices of the ascetic be, if not the very stages in the liberation of a mind that frees itself and finds itself again, that recovers itself and expands into its immeasurable entity? The attraction of all dissipation is but an obstacle—as dangerous as it is abject.

**AXEL.** And—what if the words of a woman's sons did not carry beyond . . . that lie of space which envelops the world? No! no! If that whole threatening doctrine were the great Truth, it should be cursed: the universe would be no more than an eternal trap set for mankind.

**MASTER JANUS.** Do realize, once and for all, that there is no other universe for you but the very conception of it reflected at the back of your mind; for you can neither see it fully, nor know it, nor even perceive one single point of it as that mysterious point must be in its reality. If, by any remote chance, you could take in for a moment the omnivision of the world, it would still be an illusion the next moment, since the universe changes—as you yourself change—with every pulse of your veins—and thus its Appearance, such as it may be, is, in principle, merely illusory, shifting, fallacious, and elusive.

And you are part of it! Where are your bounds, within it? Where are its bounds, within you? . . . It would call you the "universe" were it not blind and wordless! So you must isolate yourself from it! liberate yourself from it! conquer,

within yourself, its fictions, its mobility, its fallacy—its *nature*! Such is the truth, according to the absolute, which you can sense, for the Truth itself is but a blurred conception of the species you embody temporarily and which invests the Totality with the forms of its spirit. If you wish to possess it, create it! like everything else! You will carry away, you will be, nothing but your own creation. The world will never have any meaning for you other than the meaning you give to it. So make yourself grow under its veils, granting it the sublime meaning of releasing you from it! do not diminish yourself by submitting to a slave's senses, with which it grips you and enchains you. Since you will never emerge from the illusion of the universe that you create for yourself, choose the most divine. Waste no time shuddering, or dozing in skeptical or irresolute indolence, or arguing in the shifting language of dust and vermin. You are your future creator. You are a God who pretends to forget his infinite essence only that he may actualize its radiance. What you call the universe is merely the result of that pretense, of which you hold the secret. Acknowledge yourself! Affirm yourself in Being! Extract yourself from the jail of the world, child of prisoners. Escape from Becoming! Your "Truth" will be the Truth you have conceived: is its essence not infinite, like yourself? Dare, then, to beget it in the most radiant form—that is to say, *choose* it as such . . . for its being will have already preceded your thoughts, since it had to *name* itself in that form in which you recognize it! . . .—Finally, conclude that it is hard to become a God again—and move on: for that thought itself, if you dwell on it, becomes inferior: it contains fruitless hesitations.

This is the Law of What May Be Hoped: it is the sole evidence warranted by our inner infinity. One's duty is therefore to try, if one is *called* by the god one bears within! And all at once, those who dared, who wished, to embrace—and who, in their native trust, did indeed embrace—the law of



## *On the Threshold*

complete detachment from things, and shaped their lives according to the sublimity of that doctrine, liberating their being through asceticism—all at once, those chosen creatures of the Spirit feel thousands and thousands of invisible vibrant threads emanate from themselves or come to them from every part of the vastness—threads within which their Will flows into the events of the world, into all the phases of destinies, of empires, into the influential gleam of the stars, into the unloosed forces of the elements! And gradually, as they conquer purity degree by degree, they grow ever more powerful! That is the sanction of What May Be Hoped. There lies the threshold of the occult world.

*AXEL, who is scarcely listening, in a state of deep distraction, as if he were at the point of no longer either believing or understanding. Oh! Those torrential radiant riches! No longer even riches! nay, a talisman.*

**MASTER JANUS.** What childish words—daughters of Instinct, vapors of the earth—have you spoken now? You consider yourself “poor,” you who, with a glance, can possess the world! You also wish to “buy,” like other mortals, and sign contracts, toss papers about—to be sure you possess something! Thus never would you believe you were the master of a palace you beheld, until some treaty made you the prisoner of its stones, the slave of its valets, the envy of its guests, rolling their empty eyes at you! Whereas you should be able to enter that palace and, by your mere presence and sovereign gaze, cause all the servants to come and obey you—and the so-called master of the place to tell them, stammering, as he bows before the light of your face: “Address yourselves to him.” Does the illness of Youth so upset you that you have forgot this? Well, if you are being guided by its intoxication, then, of course, it is just as wholesome for you to possess ringing gold coins as to be proficient in the maxims of the

Illuminati. If you are able to carry a purse, you must fill it. But now you must come to a decision, since you have fallen to the point of being able to choose: make up your mind. Tell me whether you are at least free to banish from your mind the vain obsession of that gold? You hesitate? You can see that you are not free, since you are not liberated.

AXEL. The boughs of the Tree of Knowledge are cold: tell me, their icy blossoms bear what fruits?

MASTER JANUS. Understanding is the reflection of creating. If you would have other words . . . Were you not trying to read just now? Go back to your reading. Perhaps the book will answer you better than I: I offer no more than enough.

AXEL, *walking over to the folio, which is still open, and reading aloud*: "If thou wouldst have it, Achievement is thine! the vibrating Will that shatters and transforms the forces of Nature! the empire of hidden forces! the assisting possession of Virtue, the freedom from proscribed temptations! love of the Good for its sheer sublimity; communion with the Reason for Being, and Almighty power over the visible universe—thy shadow!—vanquished and again become THYSELF.

"Then thou, spirit, carried away by the heavenly Instinct, with thy dauntless feet, wilt tread the summits of those Em-pyreans, the parvis of the World Spirit. Imbued with thine ideal, thyself become a part of it, hardened in the astral flames, restored by the ordeals, thou wilt be the essential contemplator of thine own irradiation. Inaccessible to the calls of Death and Life—that is, to what is still thyself—thou wilt have become, in the Light, a thinking, infallible, ruling freedom."

*He dreams for a moment, then, with melancholy.*

O promises based on the benevolent complicity of chance—and offered me in expressions so unpersuasively and rashly

*On the Threshold*

solemn! Who guarantees that I shall *last*, striving for it, till I reach that state of glory? If I consider myself, a reed for a day, subject to the passing hour, what am I? a bit of mankind . . . and what is Mankind?

*He smiles scornfully.*

MASTER JANUS. It gave you the smile with which you, in contempt of your conscience, have just violated its maternal dignity.

AXEL, *his face clouding over*. Am I, then, a discarded spirit, a mere straw, a child?

MASTER JANUS. Why don't you rebel? A mountain is also a burst of anger. Let us see to what heights your wrath will go! But no; your soul has grown heavy with the mental weight of that gold; you think you are rebelling, but you are merely obeying the instincts from below, which seethe in you even now, so that your rebellion has, even now, taken on the very shape of your punishment.

AXEL. Master Janus!

MASTER JANUS. Ah! Choose. I am waiting. Your mere silence will satisfy me. One single word of indifference or wrath, and I shall have left you forever.

## RENUNCIATION

AXEL, *after a moment, to himself.* I do not know this man who brought me up.

*He sits down and dreams.*

Vital forces that integrate the laws of Substance, occult Beings in which the generations of elements, hazards, and phenomena are conceived—oh! if only you were not impersonal! If only the abstract terms and hollow formulas with which we veil your presences were more than vain human syllables! And in the chain of infinite contacts, if there were only a point at which the Spirit of man, liberated from all mediation, could somehow relate to your essence and unite with your energy! Why, oh why, should it not be so? What would the Infinite be, cut off from that possibility? which is so probable, so natural?

*As if lost in thought.*

In the name of what truth could a man condemn a doctrine, save in the name of another doctrine with principles as questionable as the former's? And other ages, other principles. Science states but does not explain: it is the eldest daughter of chimeras; thus all chimeras are, like the world—the oldest of them all!—*something more* than Nothingness. . . .  
*Suddenly.*

Ah! What do I care! It is all too somber! I want to live! not to *know* any longer! Gold is chance, so says the Earth. Spheres of Holy Election, since even you are never more than *possible*, farewell!

MASTER JANUS. It is up to you to make real that which, without your will, is only possible.

Do you accept the Light, the Hope, and the Life?

AXEL, *after a long pause and raising his head.* No.



## Renunciation

MASTER JANUS. Then be your own apostate. Bathe the flesh in your spirit. Clothe the human shape and its nudity with your desires: Sow yourself! Multiply the links in your chains! Become them! Become viscera again! Taste of the fruits of reprobation and anguish; you will soon spit out the ashes, for they are like those of the Dead Sea. Add one more entity to the black world where lifeless wills suffer—wills that did not leap desperately, in contempt of all things, toward the Increate Light! Finished, the high hopes, redeeming ordeals, and supernatural glory; finished, your inner peace. You asked for it. You became your own judge and you will have been responsible for your own fall.

AXEL *has folded his arms and stares into space, without speaking.* MASTER JANUS *has walked over to the stone stairway: he gestures with an outstretched hand: a bell rings far out in the night.*

## SCENE II

MASTER JANUS, AXEL, GOTTHOLD

GOTTHOLD, *entering.* My lord, it appears that Walter Schwert and the majordomo met a carriage on the road. They had to lead the horses here. The occupant is a woman in mourning; she asks your hospitality.

AXEL, *absently, to himself.* Ah! that is the woman who entered the Forest and asked the way to the castle, and to whom I sent guides. . . .

GOTTHOLD. She lifted her veil for a moment, in front of the fire, in the lower hall; she is a young woman of great beauty, but I have never seen so pale a face.

*Axel*

AXEL, *turning round*. Well, then, look!

GOTTHOLD *draws back a step, dumbfounded by AXEL's frightful pallor*.

Wake one of the chambermaids; and have the lamps and a fire lighted in whichever bedroom is least dilapidated. Inform the visitor that the Count of Auersperg welcomes her.

GOTTHOLD. It has been done, my lord, and I shall precede the unknown lady to your grandam's room. She is being led there by Elizabeth.

AXEL. Good. Why do I not hear Ukko? It would be his . . .

GOTTHOLD, *lowering his voice*. He is down in the crypt with Miklaus, Hartwig, and Herr Zacharias, for the burial. I must soon go and help them. It is preferable that the task be carried out by us alone.

AXEL. Ah! that's right—I had forgotten.

*He turns, drops into one of the chairs, and leans on his elbows, as though paying no further attention to anything round him.*

### SCENE III

THE SAME, SARA

*At the back, beyond the threshold of the hall, appears SARA, dressed in black, a mourning veil round her face; she is preceded by a girl wearing the peasant costume of the Schwarzwald and carrying in front of her a lighted sconce.*

*As she passes outside in the vestibule, in front of the huge open door, SARA half turns toward the hall and notices AXEL, who, leaning on his elbows near the hearth, does not see her.*

*Renunciation*

*She looks at him for a moment—then continues on her way and disappears.*

MASTER JANUS, *to himself, at the top of the stone stairway.* The Veil and the Cloak, both of them having renounced, are brought together: the Great Work is being fulfilled.





PART FOUR

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THE WORLD OF PASSION

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## ORDEAL BY GOLD AND LOVE

*The gallery of tombs in the underground vaults of the castle of Auersperg.*

*At the back, rising above the tombs, the family escutcheon, sculptured in the granite of the wall.*

*To the right and left, all along the hall, white marble mau-soleums. Statues of knights and chatelaines, the former standing or kneeling on their tombs; the women, dressed in the costume of their day, are stretched out on their tombstones, their hands clasped; sculptured marble greyhounds at their feet.*

*A funerary lamp, hung from the central vault, sheds a hazy light on the crypt. Next to a porphyry font, a large ebony prie-dieu, with violet Utrecht velvet cushions, worn, their gold tassels tarnished.*

*To the left, at the end of the passage, in the angle of the wall, a high circular stained-glass window, with an iron rose-shaped grille outside, and half-covered with a black hanging. This side of center, a low door dug into the thickness of the wall.*

*To the right, at the back of the gallery, facing front, an ogival heavy iron double-door, above three steps and opening onto a high spiral stone stairway.*

*In the center, between the tombs, a bronze incense-burner on a tripod, with a visible flame.*

*To the left, near the wall, GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS, each leaning on a spade, watch HERR ZACHARIAS, who is busy, with a silver brush, writing on an ebony cross the name of the deceased they have just buried. To the right, HARTWIG is sorting out various objects on a stone pedestal. UKKO is standing, leaning his elbows on the prie-dieu, and, with a smile, also watching HERR ZACHARIAS.*

SCENE I

UKKO, GOTTHOLD, HERR ZACHARIAS, HARTWIG, MIKLAUS

UKKO. The epitaph? I have it: He was a carefree nobleman, who set a high value on good living and beautiful women. And may this fine swordsman intercede for us in the divine light!

GOTTHOLD. Less noise, you rowdy boy! The dead man has a right to silence.

UKKO. I don't heedlessly describe as *dead* one who so little deserved to be described as *living*. Here lies a brilliant scoundrel, a heap of satisfactions, who never either loved or prayed. Henceforth, whether passing through, passing away, smiling or grave, what is he to us! He scoffed at everything: everything scoffs at him. A last spadeful, and goodnight!

GOTTHOLD. Let's be quiet, Ukko!

MIKLAUS. He is a ghost like any other, when all is said and done.

UKKO. What? I challenge you, both together if need be, to extract a ghost from—that tapped and emptied winebag.

GOTTHOLD. A child's wrath! the foolish wrath of a pigheaded boy . . .

UKKO, *smiling*. One's native indignation does not abate; it grows with life; it would not be misrepresented as wrath. Come now, if lions and jackals seem equal as animals, they have known, from time immemorial, that they are not of the same kind.

*Axel*

MIKLAUS, *clasping his hands on his spade*. You frighten us, my boy.

UKKO. You think precisely what I dare to say.

GOTTHOLD. How quickly you judge the departed, you—not yet out of diapers!

UKKO. Which of you, if you were dead, would mind sharing this grave? . . .

*Silence.*

You see.

MIKLAUS, *thoughtful*. After all, he was a gentleman of gallant blood.

UKKO. 'Twas his blood made him gallant, not his heart—and he was a gentleman—in the same way as a well-polished copper ducat is a gold coin. What are counterfeit coins worth? Less than the metal they're made of.

GOTTHOLD. Shh!

UKKO. Who can hear us? Once these heavy iron doors are closed, lightning could strike here and no one would hear it, the vaults are so thick; and they extend way out into the mountain.

GOTTHOLD. I mean that these stones cover neighbors of the same name as his.

UKKO, *in an icy tone*. To honor this one would mean showing disrespect to those others.

HERR ZACHARIAS, *standing up and leaning on the large black cross*. Child, his being, like yours, cost the blood of a god.



*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

You are young and vigorous; but that age is soon over—and then one speaks less harshly of the shades. You would do better to help me drive the cross solidly into this newly dug earth.

UKKO, *muttering*. A cross over him? That's offering a lot to someone who would care so little.

GOTTHOLD and MIKLAUS, *shocked and stern*. Ukko! We are about to get angry.

UKKO. All right; but I claim that you're the ones he would ask to be quiet, if he heard you. Let's say no more about it; I must venerate your . . . customs.

*To himself.*

And, after all! a sunbeam or starlight can make even dung sparkle.

*Driving the cross into the grave.*

So, on the off chance! . . .

HARTWIG, *arriving and throwing some powder into the burner*. Here is the incense.

UKKO. Oh! It wasn't that urgent.

SCENE II

THE SAME, AXEL

*entering through the low door, in traveling clothes and a black cloak.*

AXEL. It will soon be midnight: tomorrow at this time I shall be far away. . . . I have come to bid you farewell.

*Axel*

HERR ZACHARIAS, *with a sorrowful shudder*. Oh! are you leaving, dear master?

GOTTHOLD, *stammering*. My lord, we are very old: we had so wished that in a few days your hand would close our eyes.

AXEL, *looking at them, and after a deep hush*. Friends—friends! my old children! I must. Forgive me.

To UKKO.

You will command here in my absence—all but these men, whom you love and who love you.

UKKO, *taken aback, stammering*. What! You're not taking me? You're not taking me?

AXEL, *very low, with a sad smile*. And your betrothed, boy! and your country!—I must leave, without seeing you again, at sunrise, on this Easter day. If you would wish me well, why not have our most beautiful and ancient fanfares sound at dawn? I should hear them from afar; and they would remind me of the proud days of yore. Tonight, if you are not too sleepy, drink and sing! Lift your glasses in farewell to the memory of past glory and of swords!—Embrace me.

HARTWIG, MIKLAUS, HERR ZACHARIAS, *and* GOTTHOLD. Adieu, Auersperg!

AXEL, *after having clasped them in his arms, one after the other, to* UKKO. I awakened the master forest-ranger, good father Hans Gluck, just now in the woods. You know that he will be awaiting you, tomorrow at daybreak, for your betrothal?

UKKO. O master!

*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

AXEL, *kissing him*. My son!

*He opens his arms; UKKO rushes into them and, in tears, kisses him.*

On my table you will find a parchment signed *Axel*: the castle is yours, should I not return.

UKKO, *sobbing*. Alas!

AXEL. Your hands—and farewell. Do leave me now; and here is my last order: no one is to come down here in future.

*The four old men bow, their eyes filled with tears.*

GOTTHOLD, *in an undertone*. This is the last time we shall ever see him.

MIKLAUS, *wiping his eyes with the back of his hand*. He, who fed us with his eyes!

HERR ZACHARIAS, *to himself, somewhat haggard*. O dismay! the great treasure, lost, lost! I have lived too many days since this morning.

*They walk toward the low door. UKKO, his head in his hands, hesitates a moment, then comes back and throws himself at AXEL's hand, kissing it in mute despondency.*

AXEL. Farewell!

*The page, staggering, joins the four old men and goes out with them, sobbing. The door closes. AXEL throws his cloak on the prie-dieu.*

### SCENE III

AXEL

*Alone, glancing round him.*

Ashes, I am the eve of your reality.

*Axel*

*A pause.*

Here, "farewell" dies, empty, in its own echo. Contemplating bones is like looking at oneself in a mirror. What good is it to talk here?

*He sits down on a tomb, folds his hanging hands, and with staring eyes, loses himself in some mysterious meditation. After long minutes, raising his head.*

O sleepers, O Rosicrucians, my forefathers! If there are words that would disturb your sleep, I forget them, not wishing to weary your shades with childish supplications—and aware that, in the face of Death, the object of my dreams is mere vanity.

*Looking at the large escutcheon sculptured in the wall and flooded with light from the lamp.*

But you, golden-faced, granite sphinxes that seem to bear the secret of all Riches, I invoke you, creatures of dreams! O figures from the beyond, I call upon you—in the name of the most frightful of all things, the indifference of Fate! I command you to release from its normal silence the solitary Death's Head, which, as a symbol, weighs upon the emblem of a race culminating in me, that this Head may explain to me—whether by a gleam from its orbits or by some miraculous act, by a word—the riddle of these radiant stones which adorn its headband—and that it may disclose to me the meaning of this halo of sacred words: *ALTIUS RESURGERE SPERO GEMMATUS.*

*He has scarcely uttered the words of the device when he starts, as though listening to a shuffling of steps that approach, invisible.*

*Raising his head, he seems suddenly oblivious of those very words—and as if a prey to some human distraction, provoked by that noise of unexpected footsteps.*

What could it be? The cry of the wind? Just now I think I heard . . . yes . . . the stairway is resonant and someone is



walking very softly. Ukko, no doubt? . . . No! I just forbade them to return here.

*He looks through the large door at the bottom of the stairway; then, with a gesture of surprise.*

A woman! I could see. It's a woman. Ah! no doubt the one who arrived tonight! Who could she be? The torch she is holding above her head prevents me from seeing her face. She is coming down to these remote vaults . . . and without hesitating, as though she knew them! Something now and then glistens and gleams in her hand: a dagger, I think. What can this mean? . . . But, in truth, her insomnia is very like my own! She moves with assurance. . . .

*He glances round.*

What mysterious curiosity is aroused in me? She is drawing near. . . . Ah! I want to know! . . .

*He hides in an angle of the wall.*

#### SCENE IV

AXEL, SARA

SARA, *in her black garments and half-veiled—raising her torch with one hand, clutching a sturdy dagger in the other—pushes open the heavy iron door, which turns silently on its hinges; she then appears, standing on the stone steps.*

*Without a word, she observes the inside of the hall with profound attention. Glancing this way and that, she examines the spaces between the tombs. Then she comes down the last few steps, enters, closes the door behind her, and fastens the bar.*

*She walks over to the door on the right and also pushes the iron bolts into fastenings on the wall.*

*That done, she places her torch on a pedestal, then walks toward the massive wall at the back of the crypt.*

*There, after having turned once again toward the hall as a whole and the secular silence of the statues, she remains*

*Axel*

*thoughtful for a few minutes, then stares at the strange coat of arms on the wall.*

*Soon, stepping on a high flatstone, she approaches the escutcheon, which she seems to contemplate with mysterious attention.*

*Finally, clasping her hands on the hilt of her dagger, she appears to be gathering all her young strength, and presses the point of the blade between the eyes of the heraldic Death's Head.*

SARA. MACTE ANIMO! ULTIMA . . .

*Suddenly, the whole thickness of a wall panel splits open onto a large vaulted space, then slowly slides and sinks down under the earth, before SARA's eyes, revealing dark galleries, with wide arches, stretching all the way down the underground passage.*

*And now, from the top of the arched opening—as it gradually widens—pours forth a sparkling flow of jewels, a pattering rain of diamonds, and, directly following, a tumble of gems of every color, steeped in light, myriad flashingly faceted brilliants, heavy necklaces of still more diamonds, countless numbers of them, and blazing stones, and pearls. This torrential shimmer of lights seems suddenly to suffuse SARA's shoulders, hair, and dress: the precious stones and pearls leap round her from everywhere, tinkling on the marble tombs and bounding back, in showers of flashing sparks, onto the white statues, with the crackling of fire.*

*And since more than half the panel is now underground, from both sides of the huge cavity, rumbling and thundering cataracts of gold coins stream down and round the mysterious visitor's feet.*

*Like the jewels just before, rolling waves of gold pieces fall formidably out of broken barrels, cracked by rust and the pressure of the weight within.*

*In their sumptuous abundance, the jewels have squeezed and*

wedged together in the vast cellar; the coins, piled up in disorder behind them, are superposed in rows of massive hundreds. Here and there, between them, in the distance, the reflections of the torch light up, against a dark background, a few strips of yellowed parchment, still sealed with large red and mildewed wax impressions.

The closest dunes of gold, heaped up against the sinking wall—which has now stopped flush with the ground—roll in profusion, clink, hum, and spread wildly—in an explosion of vermilion—throughout the tomb-lined paths.

Leaning one hand against the shoulder of a very ancient statue of a knight, SARA has drawn herself up amid all that radiance, in which the funerary flame of the lamp and the flickering flame of the torch are multiplied into thousands and thousands of refractions;—then, still pale and grave, her eyes lowered, dressed in black, thus looming up in that effusion of splendors, she finishes murmuring the words of her family device, which had been interrupted by the terrific eruption of treasures:

... PERFULGET SOLA!

Then, stretching a hand out in front of her, she picks up at random a handful of long diamond necklaces and seems, for a moment, to look at her face and eyes reflected in their radiant flow.

However, no doubt sensing the presence of someone in the hall, she turns her eyes toward the statues and, in the shadows, perceives AXEL, who stands leaning against a tomb, silently watching her.

In a flash, she has dropped the jewels: she flings the folds of her black silk cloak over her shoulders—and at her waist shine two fine steel pistols. Grabbing one of them, she promptly aims at the COUNT OF AUERSPERG, fires—and throws her smoking gun far out into the hall.

*Axel*

AXEL, wounded, dashes up to her; but she has already carefully aimed her other gun: a second shot.

Hit again, but still only grazed by the bullets that struck his chest, AXEL has drawn near to SARA; the girl, gripping her dagger, stands lithe and deadly, ready to spring now, at the same time as he.

AXEL, stepping aside as if to withdraw, has forcefully, despite her swift maneuver, grabbed SARA's skillful and flashing wrist.

A moment later, irresistible—though surprised by the extraordinary resistance of his female enemy—the COUNT OF AUERSPERG is holding her in an iron grip, disarmed, paralyzed, and fallen back over his arm.

AXEL, terrifying, the dagger raised. You. I want to see the color of your blood!

About to strike, he stops at the sight of the girl's sublime face.

SARA, grabbing AXEL's wrist and pulling it violently toward her.

Well then, look!

The point of the dagger hits her shoulder, but draws only a few drops of blood, for the COUNT OF AUERSPERG seemed to have checked the impact of the blow.

AXEL, to himself, as if dazzled, and gazing upon her desperately.

O beauty of a forest aflame with lightning!

SARA, somber. Strike and forget!

AXEL, loosening his grip. For you, the most precious share, and your life spared.

SARA moves away and stands near the incense-burner.

SARA, scornful, after a moment of silence. Am I, then, an accomplice?



*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

AXEL. Your pride is feverish. Half of such riches are quite as much as the whole.

SARA. This gold, if it is gold, is Germany's.

AXEL. Germany's! Not so!

*Smiling:*

The world's!

SARA, *contemptuous*. A subtle remark, worthy of thieves that steal in the night.

AXEL, *fierce*. Try not to forget that I let you live.

SARA, *simply*. Did I ask you to?

AXEL. Come now! There are enough riches here to buy many souls.

SARA. Not enough to trouble my own.

AXEL. But who dares speak here of ancient morality?—Did you not show your gratitude for my hospitality by two attempts on my life? And where did I find you? Under these lamps and holding these jewels. Was it so that you might *restore* them to Germany as well?

SARA. No, since *I* could only have *left them* to Germany.

*After a moment.*

Margrave, all this is on no one's home ground—and I came here to possess myself of a lost scepter, for the excessive quantity of the gold transfigures its name.—What passerby has not the right, in all countries, to assume royal power, if some divine chance throws the insignia of royalty in his path? On condition, however, that he raise the scepter and command,

*Axel*

seeing that then he is truly a king; should he so note the metal of which it is made as to want to divide it, he creates for himself, as you said, the sole duty of humbly restoring it. Share? . . . How can one scatter a ray of light? . . . Survive? . . . How, being vanquished, could I escape testifying, through death, that I indeed rightfully attempted the conquest, since, able to conceive of it only as truly sovereign, I was no longer answerable to common justice?

AXEL, *looking at her fixedly*. The scepter is yours, then, whole and complete.

SARA, *grave, after a moment of silence*. So be it. But who are you?

AXEL, *thoughtful*. What does it matter! Farewell.

SARA. Oh! . . . Stay.

*Thoughtful and in a bitter voice.*

Had I been the victor, would I have relinquished my prize? No. The girl who came to visit one chance evening would have gone back out into the storm. I should have joined up with my horses and grooms, who await me on the skirts of your forest. Some time later, once the legend was forgot, I should have had my distant envoys acquire for me this manor, with which I am now so familiar! . . . I could thus never consider your generosity as more than undeserved charity, the scornful memory of it forever debasing my future joy and pride. . . . No! It is I alone who must . . . disappear. *To herself.*

Before the hour is up, I shall have drunk the liquor in this deadly ring and we shall be rid of one another.

*She looks at him.*

But, you are staggering—and I see you growing paler every minute. I must have wounded you with my guns: I'm sorry.

*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

I wanted only to kill you. One of us must survive.—Wait.  
*She removes her veil and walks toward the funerary font.*

AXEL. It's nothing. Your bullets grazed my chest—just barely.—  
Don't trouble!

SARA. This lace wet with icy water . . . cold water stops bleeding. Apply this—here!

*Having picked up the dagger, she approaches, and cuts the iron buttons off AXEL's jacket, in silence. Then, tossing the weapon away, impassive, she applies the large black veil steeped in funerary water to the COUNT OF AUERSPERG's chest.*

AXEL, *to himself, watching her.* Through these windows, the stars envelop her in mysterious light. The Earth challenges me and tempts me with the vision of her.

*Aloud, suddenly quivering.*

My girl, it is not worth dying for the name we give this great treasure that we have just scorned, after all our dreams. You are, in fact, now doomed by a far more vague and sinister circumstance. While you were speaking, the reflection of your being entered into my soul; you took hold of the beating of my heart . . . and even now your shadow falls on all my thoughts. And though I bear my own exile within me, I mean to remain alone. *I am he who does not wish to love.* . . . My dreams know another light!—Woe unto you, for you were the temptress who troubled their former hopes with the magic of your presence. Henceforth—I can feel it—knowing that you are in the world would prevent me from living! That is why I thirst to behold you lifeless . . . and—whether you can understand or not—it is to forget you that I shall become your executioner!

SARA, *as though dazzled, to herself and watching him, dumb-founded.* O incredible words!

*Axel*

*A pause; then, almost to herself, in a hollow voice.*

Were it true that you alone, among the sons of woman, could so resist the God which overwhelms you—that you prefer the destruction of your own heaven . . .

*She shudders.*

AXEL, *wrenching a heavy iron chain from one of the tombs. I swear . . . that I will close your eyes of paradise!*

SARA, *smiling. Oh! sublime moment! . . . Well then! No! It's too late. You should have struck without allowing me to glimpse your soul in the blaze of those superhuman words!*

*The COUNT OF AUERSPERG whirls the chain round him, making it whistle, as he heads for SARA, terrifying.*

SARA, *lithely moving aside to avoid the terrible impact, and throwing her arms round his neck. No. These are heavier chains—and . . . this time you are my prisoner. Try to free yourself! Ah! you see? You can no more: it is impossible.*

*She hangs from him languidly, her head thrown back and watching him with eyes of light between her lashes; her hair comes undone, falls, and envelops her. She speaks with a pure voice—very hollow, very gentle, almost low, breathless. At times she closes her eyes completely, and her grave dazzling beauty shines in the glow of the torch, the lamp, and the jewels. Gasping, her nostrils quivering, her arms limp.*

Be lenient with yourself, child! Do you think I want to live for myself! Do not kill me. What good would it do? I am unforgettable.

Do you know what you refuse! All the favors of other women are not worth my cruelty! I am the most somber of virgins. I somehow recall having caused angels to fall! Alas! flowers and children have died of my shadow.

Let yourself be seduced! I shall teach you wondrous syllables that intoxicate like wines of the Orient! I can lull



*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

you to sleep with caresses that kill: I know the secret of infinite delights and delicious cries, of pleasures beyond all hope. Oh! to bury you in my whiteness, where you would leave your soul like a flower lost deep in the snow! And to veil you with my hair, where you would breathe the spirit of dead roses! . . . Surrender. I should make you grow pale with bitter joys; I should be merciful to you in your agony! . . . My kiss is like drinking the sky. My breath is gentler than the first wafts of spring on the savannas—is more pervasive than vapors of perfumes burned in the seraglios of Cordova, more leaden with oblivion than the cedar spikes nailed by magicians into the trees of the Bagdad gardens to humiliate the divine flowers. See in my eyes the soul of glorious nights, when you walked in the valleys and looked up at the heavens. I am that exile, of unknown constellations, you were seeking! I would sacrifice every treasure to be your own, eternally. Oh! to leave life without having bathed your eyes in my tears—those proud blue stars, your eyes of hope! Oh! without having made you vibrate to the deep music of my voice of love. Oh! think—it would be frightful; impossible. To renounce all that is beyond my courage. Let yourself go, do, Axel—Axel! . . . And I will force you to murmur, your lips pressed to mine, those words of love that are most painful—and all the dreams of your desires shall flow into my eyes to multiply your kiss. . . .

*A pause.*

AXEL, *in a hollow voice, his eyes closed.* Your name, though 'twould burn my lips, I must say it! . . .

SARA, *very low, her head bowed on AXEL's shoulder.* Sara.

AXEL, *dropping the chains.* Sara, I am alone no more.

*A bleak silence.*

*Axel*

SARA, *without raising her head*. You will let me live, then?

AXEL *puts his free arm around her and leads her to the ebony prie-dieu with its violet velvet cushions*.

AXEL, *with a triumphant smile and somewhat youthful emphasis*. What madman, among kings, with all these astral jewels, would not set fire to the night of your hair! This radiant heap, these splendors you brought back to life are yours, yours alone! . . . I need no more than behold, if you will, your deadly paleness. I want to sit at your feet and suffer, in turn, the malady of human beings. Loving is that, no doubt! Is it not . . . Sara?

*She is now sitting down: rays of light, through the stained-glass window, make the black silk of her clothes sparkle.*

SARA. O charming young man, who sensed, despite the immodesty of my words, his holy sister! You are a creature beyond belief! . . . I want no adornment but your childlike eyes, in which I am so beautiful—and knowing myself doomed to suffer so much love is what has made me so very pale. As for our great riches, let us live with our starry dreams.

*He is now sitting on a cushion at SARA's feet—folding his arms round the knees of the beautiful girl; he watches her for some time, as if lost in an abyss of silent joy.*

AXEL. Yes, you had to appear to me in mourning, like a statue of Farewell, smiling and covered with jewels, amid the tombs. Under your night-black hair, you are like the ideal lily, in full bloom in the shadows.

How the sight of you makes me thrill! My love? My desires? . . . You disappear within them, as a swimmer in the Ocean. If you would flee, you must flee into them. They clasp you and penetrate you, O beloved! They lift you and die in you . . . to live again in your beauty!

*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

SARA, *smiling, breathing in the scent of AXEL's hair.* You smell of autumn leaves under limpid skies, O my hunter! You made your wildness one with the soul of all forests. . . . Dear joy . . .

*She beholds him, as if intoxicated and proud.*

AXEL, *as from deep in a dream.* Sara, my virginal friend, my eternal sister, I no longer hear what you say, but your voice alone . . .

*Folding her in his arms, in rapture.*

Oh! the flower of your being, your mouth so divine! With one kiss, to become . . . oh! the light of that smile—to drink that breeze from heaven, your breath! your soul!

SARA, *drawing AXEL's brow to her breast—then, grave, and gently pressing her lips to his.* My soul? Here it is, my beloved! *They remain lost to the world, as if lifeless and wordless.*

AXEL, *reopening his eyes.* You shivered: no doubt the cold of these stones.

*He has gently freed himself.*

Upstairs, in the old halls—where fires burn night and day . . .

SARA, *smiling.* No; I shiver not with cold but with us alone. Would you not prefer to await our first sun here?

AXEL, *frantic, all of a sudden.* O vision, I should wish to die of you! But I find you inconceivable! Whence do you come? What was your human existence until . . . us?

SARA, *smiling.* Are you interested? Oh! is it possible!

*She brushes her hair back from her forehead.*

That is—I have, in truth, forgot what you ask. Since I have become as an empress of the Orient, I know nothing but you.

*Axel*

I was born an hour ago: past time is no more. To plunge again into the memory of life! would you have me?

AXEL. What modulations of love vibrate in your dove-like voice!

No—forget memories! Do not vanish into the vain testimony of the earth; remain, rather, forever unknown to me! . . . What are we, even in the past? Some dream of our own making.

SARA. My dear spouse, here is the ring given my grandams as a pledge of wedding nights: look at what is engraved on its ancient emerald.

*She raises her right hand a bit: a jeweled family ring, with an incised coat of arms, sparkles on one of her fingers; AXEL considers the fateful jewel for a moment; then, after a wordless reverie, he looks at her in silence.*

AXEL, *with a grave smile*. Yes, one would think . . . there is a destiny!

SARA, *with the same smile*. Surely, and if the illusion seems beautiful to you, come, I too will cherish it.

AXEL, *standing, deeply concerned*. Since, in all its mystery, it would appear to strive to fulfill itself around us, why not help it with our faith? It will testify that our beings awaited one another.

*A pause.*

SARA, *glancing round her, and as if to dispel their thoughts*. I too have a marble family, in a manor in the north of France. There sleeps my father, Yvain de Maupers, a rustic nobleman—and also my mother, a majestic creature summoned by Heaven!

*Hand in hand, both walk over to a mausoleum; the statue of*



*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

*a woman with clasped hands is stretched out on the tombstone, a sculptured greyhound at her feet.*

—Is she not your young mother? Yes, you have the same noble brow . . . and look, such melancholy! Oh! How often I felt her gentle hand, invisible, press mine, as I turned the pages of her Book of Hours in the convent!

*She bows down; then in an undertone.*

Madame, as you see: I give your child all that I am.

AXEL, *raising his head.* At the convent?

SARA, *moving away, her hand resting on AXEL's shoulder.* I speak of an abbey where all the young days of my life were held prisoner. . . . I think I can remember having suffered there.

AXEL, *with a start and in a low, constricted, staccato voice.* Ah! Tomorrow the beggar shall sit on one of the scattered stones of that building! It is no more. The name of the abbey?

SARA, *in a gentle voice and gently pushing aside, with her foot, some obtrusive jewels on the ground.* O brother Axel! I am so unmoved by offenses, I can hardly take pride in my patience with them. Think! Should hearts doomed to the torture of not loving me be punished still more for such misfortune? And were they so guilty, in some past more remote than life, as to create that very torment for themselves, are they not ill-fated enough by their own natures? We have only to pity them.—Hate me? You could never inflict upon them a punishment worse than that.

*Thoughtful, while they seem oblivious of the great treasure.*

Of course, in that cloister I saw cruel eyes in which the burning faith was merely the reflection of an executioner's torch. To eyes such as those, the sky seemed never dark enough; they deemed it well to thicken its cloud with smoke

## *Axel*

from the stake. I heard the beat of menacing hearts—in which the desperate fear of a God—that is, the idea they have of God!—is so blind they believe it to be Love—in which the “Beginning of wisdom,” its limits forgot, is proudly taken for infinite Wisdom. Are they not hoping that the impending revenge of their pure fugitive will justify the prayers they are now doubtless offering for my salvation?

*Smiling, then more and more sadly.*

Let them pity me, then, or condemn me . . . to keep face! In my formidable mercy, I leave them with the unworthy image they have formed of their escaped prisoner! In truth, of what do they accuse me before God—those consciences compounded of forbidden harshness, which could no more but offend my hope? My soul has little fear of those wicked judges, who thus dare to brave the terrible wrath of the Dove. Those veiled hearts have the same innocence as the abyss, I know it! An abyss also says: “I reflect the Light!” All things reflect light: one, then, is as true as another; every one to his own infinite! Come now, let their own souls punish themselves! As for me, I would deign to punish an abyss only—by taking wing.

AXEL, *in a trembling hollow voice.* The name of that abbey!

*Sara has looked at him: all at once she realizes to what an inexorable degree her words have provoked the indignation of her chosen young man. Reprisals of blood and fire flame in AXEL's eyes—and he will surely carry out his dreams of extermination, the day he is all powerful.*

*Wrapped in that vast avenging love, she quivers. After a long pause, she falls at the knees of her young lover.*

*All in black, illuminated by the lamp, the sparkle of precious stones strewn round her, and the nearby glare of the torch, she presses her pale hands on the young man's heaving chest; he steps back, overwhelmed with confusion and as if dazzled,*

*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

*but she follows him, kneeling, on the gravel of the tomb-lined path.*

SARA, *in a strange and grave voice.* Axel! Grant pardon to that holy prison—in the name of its windows of stained glass through which I found the evening light so beautiful! in the name of the organs that my fingers made weep with such heavy sobs! in the name of those cold gardens where my melancholy so often reposed! . . .

I plead with you also in the name of a young girl, pale as we, but very like the exiled seraphim—and whose heart, consumed with native love, was so enamored of sacrifice . . . that it gave me the flower of its candid dreams, preferring to fall rather than seclude itself.

Mercy! in the name of that child whom I grieved! Oh! on behalf of her pure eyes, still clouded over with the thought of me, alas! and whom her God will surely free of my shadow—on behalf of her celestial and lonely love—I beg you!

AXEL, *shuddering, then in a hollow voice.* I grant pardon to that dwelling and its hosts, only in memory of this night when I first saw you.

*He stops, his eyes steady, his fists clenched.*

SARA, *standing, radiant, folding him in her arms and kissing him on the brow.* Axel! my young king!

AXEL, *moving away with her toward the prie-dieu and looking at the dark shimmer of SARA's clothes, as if for the first time.* But, why are you in mourning on this night of joy, Sara? . . .

SARA, *very simply.* I am in mourning for no human creature (I have never known one who deserved that symbol of sadness) but rather for a more obscure friend—oh! so humble! so lost among things! . . .

Look—you, who alone understands me!  
*From her breast she pulls a wilted flower.*

Do look—as if we were alone on earth, lost between the dream and life—look at this mysterious flower, Axel!  
*Harps, in the shadows, playing the song of the Rosicrucians.*

See the inconsolable rose! It appeared to me in a forsaken yard, at a break of day full of dangers: I was fleeing! just emerging from the Saint Apollodora cloister. My white garments, snatched from the mystic feast, blended with the heavy snowflakes falling from the branches of the protective forest and covering my footsteps. Armed with this reliable dagger, against our *fellowmen* and against also the beasts of the woods, and still trembling from the light of the candles, I listened in the night to the far-off bells recalling to the echoes of the world the birth of the child Emmanuel, alas! for whom I should have wished to die. All at once, in the light of the last stars, my eye was drawn to the wonder of this flower—like me, victorious over Winter—and the vision of it seemed to emanate from myself! Is not the harmony between things and beings infinite? . . . Was I not meant to encounter this royal rose, symbol of my fate, a family and divine *correspondence*, as I took my very first steps? The manifest miracle of it greeted my first morning of freedom! It was like a wondrous sign—the *perhaps immobilized image of one single word in which I had become embodied an hour before*. It made me quiver—this flower that seemed fresh-blown from my soul! No doubt it recognized my lips, Axel, when, scornful of all dangers, I told it my great hopes in a long kiss! Pressed mute against my motherly mouth, I could feel in my heart that it begged me to pluck it. Gently, therefore, I pulled its whole stem, through the hard thorns, from the dead bush whence it sprang and which bore it. Then, with my breath, I warmed its scent between my hands—hands that still held this secret weapon, forged in olden days.



*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

*She points to the cruciform dagger, which had fallen to the ground.*

Listen! Spirits—I think—genii, perhaps, were surely enclosed in its beauty! . . . Straightaway, passages of the history of mankind, veiled from my mind until then, lighted up august and supernatural meanings in my memory. I thus understood, without being even able to account for my interest in understanding it, why this flower—thus placed, by chance, in my hands and on the cross of the dagger—formed a Sign that, in the past, had scattered like sand the proudest and strongest of empires. Just now I saw that Sign sparkle on each of these tombs,

*Pointing to the pistols on the ground.*

in the fire of those treacherous guns—when, at you . . .

*She enfolds AXEL in her arms, passionately.*

AXEL. It inspired you, did you say, Sara?

SARA. Oh! with a thousand thoughts! . . . I remembered, for example, that one of the seers of Mankind had based his verse on the shape of this flower, that he might express the holy and crimson circles of the paradise of new Hope! Then, turning my mind to scoffing men, I could not help but smile, despite the indescribable cold—recalling that the most serious, oh! the most industrious of peoples had, for a century, sacrificed one another for roses.

*A pause.*

Yes, it was my one companion and my mysterious friend during the long journey—when, dressed as a pilgrim, I walked with my eyes fixed on the star that shines over your forests, while passersby threw insults at me in the twilight! And the dear scent of this assisting flower gave me new life when—before reaching the first large town, where I sold my pearl and opal necklace to Jews—hunger and sleepless nights were exhausting my solitary feet.

*Axel*

AXEL, *kneeling beside her and kissing her feet.* Oh! may I burn my lips on your pale feet, glory of marbles to come!

SARA, *her eyes on the dead flower.* At the rising of suns, I knew that it felt 'twould be sweeter to die on my breast than be reborn in exile. That is why I am in mourning for its enchantment, now its spirits have flown from it toward the highest essence of its light. It wished to die of my shadow, loving me! Let me wipe your gentle eyes with it! . . . Look! . . . It seems to live again! It takes your young tears for dew! But rather . . . No—no! I want to pluck off its petals cruelly over you, my knight, as an omen of all the ways of surrender my love will find to delight you!

*She silently plucks off the flower's petals over AXEL's brow and hair; then, suddenly strange and grave.*

How glad I am to see that my few words have made you so concerned with the ghost of an annihilated flower! . . .

AXEL, *covering her hands with kisses and beholding her with delight.* I love you.

SARA, *standing beside AXEL, leaning on the prie-dieu, and speaking as though, in a dream, she were following a series of mirages between half-closed eyes.* Say, beloved! Would you come with me to those lands where caravans pass in the shade of the palm trees of Kashmir or Mysore? Would you come to Bengal and choose, in the bazaars, roses, stuffs, and Armenian maidens, white as ermine skins? Would you raise armies—and, like a young Cyaxare, stir the north of Iran to revolt? Or, if we rather set sail for Ceylon, with its white elephants carrying vermilion towers, its fiery macaws in the foliage, and its sun-drenched dwellings where the rain of fountains falls in marble courtyards?—Would you live, some few days, a strange and remote life in those porcelain abodes of Yedo, the land of Japanese lakes? There, in moonlight,

bloom clumps of barbarous flowers, very like clusters of perfumed daggers. Of an evening it might please us to return, smoking opium in gold and jade pipes, to the swaying of palanquins. Would you prefer me to swim in waves that reflect great Carthage, near a basalt house where perfumes burn on silver tripods! Or if we traveled to the red countries of Spain! Oh! how sad and wondrous must be the palaces of Granada, the Generalife gardens, the oleanders of Andalusian Cadiz, and the woods of Pamplona, where lemon trees are in such numbers that the stars seem like their golden flowers through the leaves! And the vestiges of Saracen temples, Art that has vanished, forbidding cities! And farther still, the Isles of the Blest, where winter, all in flower, humbles the springtime of other lands! There rocks are transfigured by dawn into huge sapphires, and there the tide comes to die, in a golden and opal mist, gentle as a last kiss. If you prefer, we will fulfill dreams of glory, perform sublime tasks! We will be blessed by the people! But if you would—dressed in rich and mottled rags, a blunderbuss on your shoulder and a harp on my belt—we will rather go as nomads and sing on the roads and in the squares of the towns of Bohemia, like swarthy tziganes; I will read the fortunes of beautiful girls, and silver coins will be tossed in our wooden bowls for our evening meal at the inn! We could thus make our way singing, from the south of the land of the Bulgars to the strait of Bab el Mandeb.—Would you have our horses strike sparks on the flagstoned quays of the Neva or the Danube?—Perhaps you would see women dancing in Poland and Hungary, with feasting and music, in the great halls of palaces?—Would you have us, as soldiers of fortune on our brig with steel cannon, call at the archipelagos and explore all the way from the coasts of Guinea to the silent banks of the Hudson? Then sail up the Nile? Light the insides of the pyramids of Chephren and Osymandias, and double their golden circles! Could we not also go to the banks of the Ganges and, we too,

found some divine religion? Come now! We will make miracles, we will build temples, and, beyond any doubt, Heaven itself shall obey us.—If, one day, we were to gather delicious poisons in Melanesia and stroll about in Sumatra under the Manchineel trees? Would you see my face reflected in the rivers that flow near Golconda, Bijapur, or Ophir? Or travel in Nubia on the banks of the Zaijr, the dark river where day turns to night with no gloaming?—Would you come to see Seleucia, where holy apostles took to the sea and sailed off to conquer the world? Would you live among the ruins of Antioch? There, growths of supplicant ivy block pilgrims at the crossings! But let us fly, rather, like halcyons, toward ever blue and calm horizons, to Corinth, to Palermo, under the colonnades of Silistria! Come! We will row over Atlantis in triremes! Or we might rather behold the shining nights in the land of Idumaea? And, then, the North as well! What delight to fasten on our steel skates and glide over the roads of pale Sweden! or to Christiana, over the paths and dazzling fjords of Norway's mountains! Then again, why not go off and live in a snow-covered cottage, in some remote village of the North? Would you see the desolate moors of Wales? the parks of Windsor and the London fogs? Rome, that somber city of splendors? frivolous Paris shining with light?—How strange it must seem to wander in the motley streets of Nuremberg, that patient city of midnight!—Would you blur the reflections of stars in the Bay of Naples or in Venetian lagoons, trailing in the wake of the gondola some marvelous stuffs from Smyrna or Basra? Or, happy together in some Swiss chalet, would you see dawn shine on the snows of the Monte Rosa?—Would an Antilles hammock please you more than the tents of Bessarabia? or the pleasures of space?—The two of us carried over the ice by reindeer or over the sand by ostriches, or seeing the peacefully kneeling dromedaries round a tent in an oasis of ancient Heptanomide? Would you have us hide away in Pompeii and lead a



*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

Latin life, as if the Caesars were still alive? Or, still farther, somewhere in the more somber Orient? Come. I will lean my arm on yours amid stones that once were the hanging gardens of Nineveh! and in ruins that once were Thebes, Sardis, Heliopolis, Ancyra, Sicyon, Eleusis—and the city of the magi, Ecbatana! Would you prefer a marble tower near the Euphrates, or under the sycamores of Solyma, or on the heights of Horeb? Would you dream the joyful Oriental dream? have us set up as merchants in Samarkand and barter? You will become the ambassador of some distant queen and pay me visits in Sheba. As kings full of care, we will see the sun, of an evening, set fire to the waters of the Red Sea! But also, if you wish, we shall be merely in love, one with the other, listening to the humming birds, off in some hut in the Floridas! . . . You see, since we are all-powerful, since now we are very like unknown kings, what does it matter which dream we prefer among dreams? And as for the land of our exile, would not all the countries of the earth, for us, be the Isle of Thule?

AXEL, *with a grave smile*. Child! Radiant child!

SCENE V

AXEL, SARA, *then the* CHORUS OF THE OLD MILITARY RETAINERS,  
*then in the distance, the* CHORUS OF WOODCUTTERS,  
*then* UKKO's voice.

SARA. The sea, O my beloved, I want the sublime sea! Let us first go to Italy! to its marble and flaming ruins, to its shining bays! We will soon consume our cloudless exile there. O nights of love in palaces! . . . We will buy the most somber of them in Florence; would you? Florence must be as beautiful as Palmyra in bygone days!

*At that moment, distant notes of a song—a choir of harsh*

*Axel*

*voices muffled by the thickness of the underground walls—  
come to their ears through the deep silence of the recess.*

CHORUS OF THE OLD MILITARY RETAINERS.

The master is leaving the castle bare,  
Gone, all the daydreams of love, gold, and frays.  
We are old, very old, and soon, way out there,  
We shall be shades.

AXEL. My servants are sitting up tonight. It is at my bidding  
that they drink and sing; they are hailing the departure . . .  
of a stranger.

SARA. As soon as the morning twilight strikes the windows, let  
us flee to the land of Hope!

*As if oppressed by the idea of joys to come, she closes her  
eyes and presses her hand against the marble of a tomb.*

O the voluptuous pleasures of living!

THE CHORUS, *muted by the distance.*

Farewell, black pride of an iron Past:  
With us its lustrous glow grows pale!  
As the light a setting sun would cast,  
The ancient world does fail.

*Suddenly, outside, the sky turns blue; a ray of dawn shines  
through the fringe of the window hanging. As she opens her  
eyes, SARA sees it and quivers.*

SARA, *crying out.* The day! the dawn! Axel . . . Look! What a  
rising future!

*She walks over to the window and draws the hanging aside:  
the blue of the morning is visible in the crypt.*

THE CHORUS, *from the depths of the castle.*

Future! You too shall hear the call of death!

*Ordeal by Gold and Love*

Let us drink, since change we'll see!  
And may the Angel's bugle sound with mirth . . .  
If an awakening there be!

SARA, *joyful, with a triumphant smile, after pointing to the huge treasure and the jumble of jewels.* Let us leave! The time has come; let us wrap ourselves in our cloaks.—Out there, under the violet leaves, our furs and weapons sparkle with light even now; the horses are stamping on the dew. O my young lover! How they shall carry us under branches fragrant with the storm! Look: we are fleeing in a radiant mist; soon, to the singing of birds, we will see a thatched cottage, its roof covered with moss and steeped in a thousand dewdrops. What gladness to drink the morning milk together with a smile, standing in grass strewn with fallen leaves!—And we flee! Soon there will be men on the roads! then a village! . . . then a town! . . . towns! then the sun! then the world!  
*A deep silence.*

AXEL, *in a strange, very calm voice—and looking at her.* Sara, I thank you—for the sight of you.  
*Drawing her into his arms.*

I am happy, O my lily-like bride! my mistress! my virgin! my life! Happy that we are here, together, full of youth and hope, imbued with a truly immortal feeling, alone, unknown rulers, and all radiant with this mysterious gold—buried in the depths of this manor—during this whole appalling night.

SARA. Out there, everything summons us, Axel, my one and only master, my love! Youth, freedom! the intoxication of power! And—who knows, great causes to defend . . . all the dreams to realize!

*She walks over toward the glimmer of dawn and holds up the hanging.*

## THE SUPREME CHOICE

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AXEL, *grave and impenetrable*. Why realize them? . . . they are so beautiful!

SARA, *somewhat surprised, turns round and looks at him*. My beloved, what do you mean?

AXEL, *still calm and grave*. Drop those hangings, Sara: I have seen enough of the sun.

A pause.

SARA, *uneasy, to herself and still observing him*. Pale, and his eyes fixed on the ground, he is pondering some plan.

AXEL, *in an undertone, thoughtful, and as if to himself*. A god no doubt envies me now, for I—I can die.

SARA. Axel, Axel, are divine thoughts already chasing me from your mind? . . . Come, here is the earth! Come and live!

AXEL, *cold, smiling, and clearly punctuating his words*. Live? No. Our existence is full—and its cup is running over! What hourglass could count the hours of this night! The future? . . . Sara, believe what I say: we have just consumed the future. All the realities, what would they be tomorrow, compared with the mirages we have just lived? Why follow the example of cowardly mortals, our former brethren, and barter this golden drachma with its effigy of the dream—obol of the Styx—which sparkles in our triumphal hands?

The quality of our hope no longer allows us the earth. What can we ask of this wretched star, where our melancholy lingers on, save pale reflections of such moments? The earth, you say? But what has it ever accomplished, that drop of frozen mud, whose Time is never more than a lie up in

The Supreme Choice

the heavens? It is the earth, don't you see, that has become the Illusion! Admit, Sara, that in our strange hearts we have destroyed the love of life—and it is indeed in REALITY that we ourselves have become our souls! To agree to live after that would be but a sacrilege against ourselves. Live? Our servants will do that for us.

Sated for an eternity, let us rise from table and, in all fairness, leave the crumbs of our feast to be picked up by those hapless creatures who, by nature, cannot measure the value of realities by anything but Sensation. I have thought so much, I would not deign to act!

SARA, *disturbed and apprehensive*. Those words are superhuman: how would one dare to understand them!—Axel, your brow must be burning; you are feverish: let my gentle voice cure you.

AXEL, *supremely impassive*. My brow is not burning; nor am I speaking in vain—and the only fever of which we must, in fact, be cured is that of existing. Dear thought, listen! and you yourself shall then decide. Why seek to bring back to life all the intoxications, one by one, whose ideal sum we have just experienced, and why wish to subject our most majestic desires to momentary concessions, detracting from their very essence, which would doubtless be destroyed tomorrow? Would you then accept, with our *fellowmen*, all the pities that *Tomorrow* holds in store for us, the surfeits, the illnesses, the constant disappointments, old age, and yet again give birth to creatures doomed to the boredom of continuing? . . . We, whose thirst would not be slaked by an Ocean, shall we consent to be satisfied by a few drops of water, because some madmen have claimed, with insignificant smiles, that, after all, there lies wisdom? Why deign to answer Amen to that litany of slaves? How wearisome and fruitless, Sara! and

Axel

not a worthy sequel to this miraculous wedding night, when, though still virgins, we possessed each other forever!

SARA, *in a choked voice*. Ah! it is almost divine! You want to die.

AXEL. You see the external world through your soul: it dazzles you! yet it can never give us one single hour that would compare, in intensity of life, with one second of the hours we have just known. The true, absolute, perfect fulfillment is the inner moment we have lived, one with the other, in the funereal splendor of this vault. We have just experienced that ideal moment: it is now irrevocable, whatever name you give it! To try and relive it, by shaping, each day, in its image, the ever disappointing dust of outward appearances, would merely mean taking the risk of perverting it, diminishing its divine impression, annihilating it in what is purest within ourselves. Beware of not knowing how to die while there is still time.

Oh! the external world! Let us not be taken in by the old slave, chained to our feet in the light of day, and that promises us the keys to a palace of enchantments, when in its clenched black fist it hides only a handful of ashes. Just now, you were speaking of Bagdad, Palmyra, and—where else?—Jerusalem. If you but knew what a heap of uninhabitable stones, what a barren and burning soil, what dens of loathsome beasts those paltry villages *in reality* are, though they appear to you all aglow with memories, far off in that Orient which you carry within yourself! And what tiresome sadness the mere sight of them would cause you! . . . Come now, you have imagined them? that is enough: do not look at them. The earth, I tell you, is blown up like a bright bubble, with woes and lies, and, daughter of the primordial nothingness, it bursts, Sara, at the merest breath of those who draw near to it! Let us withdraw from it, completely! suddenly! in a sacred bound! . . . Would you? It is not madness: all the gods whom Man-

The Supreme Choice

kind has worshiped have done it before us, sure of a Heaven, of the heaven of their being! . . . And I find, from their example, that we have no more to do here.

SARA. No! it is impossible! . . . It is no longer true! It is even more inhuman than superhuman! My lover! forgive me! I am afraid! You make me dizzy. Oh! I will defend life! Think! to die—thus? We who are young and full of love, masters of this supreme opulence! beautiful and dauntless! all radiant with intelligence, nobility, and hope! What? right now? Without seeing the sun just once again—without bidding it farewell! Think! It is so fearful! . . . Would you—tomorrow? Perhaps tomorrow I shall be stronger, no longer belonging to myself!

AXEL. O my beloved! O Sara! Tomorrow I should be the prisoner of your splendrous body! Its delights would have enchained the chaste energy that now animates me! But soon, since it is the law of living creatures, if our raptures were to subside, and if, at the striking of some cursed hour, our love were to wane, consumed in its own flame . . .

A deep silence.

SARA, *thoughtful*. I tremble: but it may be from pride as well! . . . Surely, if you persist, I will obey you! I will follow you into the unknown night. Yet, remember the human race!

AXEL. The example I leave it is well worth those it has given me.

SARA. Those who fight for justice say that—to kill oneself is to desert.

AXEL. The judgment of beggars, for whom God is but a means to earn their bread.

Axel

SARA. Perhaps it would be nobler to think of the common good
—the good of all!

AXEL. The universe devours itself; that is the price paid for the
good of . . . all.

SARA, *somewhat bewildered*. What! forgo so many joys? . . .
Leave our treasure to these shadows! is it not cruel!

AXEL. Man carries with him into death only that which he re-
fused to possess in life. In truth—all we leave here is an empty
husk. That which gives value to our treasure is within our-
selves.

SARA, *in a more hollow voice*. We know what we are leaving:
not *that* which we shall find!

AXEL. We are returning, pure and strong, to *that* which inspires
us with the dizzying heroism of confronting it.

SARA. Can you hear the laughter of mankind, should it ever
learn of the somber story, the superhuman madness of our
deaths?

AXEL. Leave the apostles of Laughter in their density. Life, each
day, sees to it that they are cudgeled in punishment.
The first light of dawn shines through the window.

SARA, *thoughtful, after a pause*. To die!

AXEL, *smiling*. O beloved! I do not suggest that you survive me,
so convinced am I that, even now, in your heart, you care
nothing for that wretched bait called "living."

*He casts his eyes round him, as though looking for the
dagger.*

The Supreme Choice

SARA, *raising her head, now pale as a candle.* No, in this ring, under the emerald, I have a swiftly lethal poison: let us look for one of the more beautiful cups in all this treasure . . . and may your will be done.

AXEL, *folding her in his arms and gazing on her in somber ecstasy.* O flower of the world!

After a moment, he leaves her and walks over to the sparkling piles in the vault. While he shifts about the jewels and golden objects, SARA has picked up the long diamond necklaces from the tombs and has silently adorned herself.

SARA, *gently, toward the window.* What a lovely sun!

AXEL, *returning and holding a magnificent cup inlaid with precious stones, looks at SARA, then, watching her, and in a gentle voice.* Would you walk with me in the plain, gathering spring flowers? What joy to feel the morning wind in our hair! Come! our lips will meet on the same primrose! . . .

SARA, *who has guessed at AXEL's melancholy thought.* No. I love you more than the sight of the sun: our lips will meet, but touching the same spot on the radiant rim of this cup!—Here is my ring . . . an engagement ring, this too!

She removes her family ring, presses the emerald's spring, and shakes the few grains of brown powder out of the gold bezel into the bottom of AXEL's cup.

AXEL. The dew is still falling; just a few of its bright tears will be enough to dissolve the poison in this holy chalice!

He climbs up on a sepulcher near the high window; and while SARA absently strokes a marble greyhound, he lifts his right hand, with its shining tragic goblet, and thrusts his arm out through the bars of the window.

The heavens will thus be a party to our suicide!

Axel

From afar, voices in the forest are singing a song of the morning: they listen.

CHORUS OF WOODCUTTERS, *out in the distance.*

Joyfully! Joyfully!
Down with the tall trees whose death gives us bread!
As morning draws near, under golden shade,
Woodcutter, waker of birds, lend your ear!
The wind, voices, leaves, wings!
Everything sings from the depths of the woods:
Glory be to God!

SARA. Do you hear them? God? they say! They too, the killers of forests!

AXEL. Let one glorious syllable fall in peace into the soul of the last woods!

SARA, *thoughtful, as though to herself.* I, too, held an ax! but—I did not strike.

In the plains, shouts and fanfares.

UKKO, *in the distance.*

On the slope of the flowery hills
Behold the betrothed!
The dew, at her white gown's edge,
Makes a border of pearls;
Hail my young love!
—Lowered before the virgins
Are the eyes of a German boy!

Thus the sound of his steps shall ring out upon the earth.

AXEL. Those are the children who are marrying! Do send them a word of happiness: some thought coming to them from you, Sara, would surely make them still more charming to each other!

The Supreme Choice

SARA, *smiling and turning toward the window.* O carefree children, singing out there on the hill . . . bless you!

AXEL, *coming down to her again.* The glow of this nuptial lamp grows pale in the light of day! It will die out. So shall we.

Raising his cup.

Old earth, I shall not build the palaces of my dreams on your barren soil: I shall carry no torch, I shall not strike down enemies.

May the human race, finally free of its vain imaginings, vain despairs, and all the lies that dazzle eyes which are made to grow dim—no longer willing to play the game of solving this bleak riddle—yes, may it end, slipping away unconcerned, like us, without so much as bidding you farewell.

SARA, *all sparkling with diamonds, leaning her head on AXEL's shoulder, and as though lost in a mysterious transport of delight.* Now, since the infinite alone is not a lie, let us—forgetful of the rest of man's words—rise into our one and the same Infinite!

AXEL *lifts the deadly cup to his lips—drinks—shudders, and staggers;* SARA *takes the cup, drinks all that remains of the poison, then closes her eyes.* AXEL *falls;* SARA *bends down to him, quivers, and now both of them are lying clasped in each other's arms, on the gravel of the tomb-lined path, their lips exchanging the last breath.*

Then they lie motionless and lifeless.

Now the sun casts a yellow glow on the marbles and statues; the crackling flames of the lamp and the torch turn to smoke in the bright beams of light that flow slantingly from the window. A gold piece falls, rolls, and chimes against a tomb, striking it like the hour. And—breaking the silence of the fearful place where two human beings, by their own choice, have

Axel

just consecrated their souls to the exile of HEAVEN—one hears, from without, the distant murmur of the wind in the vast reaches of the Forest, the vibrations of awakening space, the surge of the plains, the hum of Life.

AFTERWORD



On April 6, 1894, at the request of the young people of the Latin Quarter, *Axel*—a dramatic prose poem by the late Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—was performed at the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse. According to Alexandre Georges, who wrote the music for the play, the young audience was so enthusiastic that they demanded an encore of the entire fourth part, "The World of Passion" (see E. Drougard, "L'*Axel* de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, Oct.-Dec. 1935). *Axel* had already been performed twice at the Théâtre de la Gaîté Lyrique, on February 26, 1894, for guests only, and on February 27 for the general public. But those audiences were rather divided in their reactions. On the one hand, the champions of common sense and conservative critics, such as Francisque Sarcey, considered the five-hour "recital" a monument of wordiness, obscurity, decadent madness, and profound boredom. On the other hand, while the symbolists, the idealists, and their friends, who represented the anti-naturalist and anti-positivist movement, disagreed as to the merits of the performance itself—some of them believing it sacrilegious to have degraded *Axel* by having it embodied on stage, which to them was a place of artistic prostitution—they all agreed that the text was the masterpiece of their time. So far as we know, *Axel* was never performed again until January 30, 1962, at the Studio des Champs-Élysées, this time in a heavily cut version directed by Antoine Bourseiller.

Axel is thus one of those works which are seldom performed and not often read today, but which, in their time, were of prime importance. Indeed, the specialists of French symbolism are unanimous in acknowledging *Axel's* significance in the development of the movement which, since Baudelaire, has dominated the modern poetic vision. Edmund Wilson, for example, devoted a detailed analysis to it in his "Study of Imaginative Literature from 1870 to 1930" and did not hesitate to

entitle his book *Axel's Castle* (1931). In his *Mallarmé* (1952) Kurt Wais claims that *Axel* is "the only great monument of a French *Weltanschauungstragödie* in the 19th century." Dorothy Knowles, in *La Réaction idéaliste au théâtre depuis 1900* (1934), calls *Axel* "the Bible of Symbolism," to which Guy Michaud, in *Le Message poétique du Symbolisme* (1947), replied that, though he would not go quite so far, *Axel* was indeed "a true summa of mystical idealism . . . one of the springs to which the poets of the 1890's would constantly come to drink."

"Summa" would seem to be just the word to describe *Axel*, which is a summa not only of the trends of thinking of an entire period but of a series of personal inner experiences. For towering over this proud and lofty work, marked by renunciation and the blackest of pessimisms, is the profile of its aristocratic author, desperately in search of the absolute.

When he arrived in Paris in 1857 or '58, Jean Marie Mathias Philippe Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, born in 1838, was the son of an impoverished Breton nobleman who was becoming ever more destitute in his own search for imaginary treasures supposedly buried deep in the land of Brittany. Thus, in an essentially bourgeois and materialistic society, the young man represented the end of an illustrious race whose family tree went back to the eleventh century and which included, among other prominent figures, the Grand Master of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem who, in 1530, established the order in Malta. After a short time in Paris the young Villiers, who had been introduced into literary circles, struck his contemporaries not by his works (which were then almost nonexistent) but by his gifts as an imaginative and profound conversationalist, his talents as a musician, his inner ferment, and the scope of his poetic and intellectual ambitions. He soon became friends with Baudelaire, seventeen years his senior, and in 1863 met Mallarmé, four years his junior. Although his first great works were then being published (his novel *Isis*, 1862), for example, it was still his presence and inner strength that impressed

Afterword

his acquaintances. Much later, in 1890, after Villiers' death, Mallarmé, who had come to consider him one of his dearest friends, lectured throughout Belgium on the author of *Axel* (a lecture printed in *Quelques Médaillons et portraits en pied*). He mentioned some of Villiers' admirers in the early days in Paris: "François Coppée, Dierx, Hérédia, Paul Verlaine, do remember! and you, Catulle Mendès"—that is, Parnassians and presymbolists—and added: "A genius! That is what we understood him to be." Mallarmé also apparently said to a friend one day: "The word 'infinite' can be uttered with dignity only by a young gentleman, of the Louis XIII type, in furs and with blond hair"; and explained: "Such was Villiers when I heard him speak the word in my presence for the first time" (reported by Henry Roujon, *La Galerie des bustes*, 1909). And these impressions of Mallarmé's were echoed by all the writers of the idealist reaction of those years.

Yet that extraordinary glory within a literary clique was not enough to bring Villiers to the forefront of French letters in the 1860's. Moreover, in 1870 he was reduced to a state of true poverty. He refused to do any other work for a living, led a chaotic life, wrote a great deal (often lying flat on the floor, for lack of furniture), but published little, largely because publishers refused his manuscripts. After 1882, however, the idealist reaction began to triumph and Villiers' major works were published: *Les Contes cruels* (1883)—a book whose "poignant irony enraptured Des Esseintes," the hero of J. K. Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884), and by thus appearing in the great decadent's ideal library, Villiers gained popularity with the young—*L'Eve future* (1886), *Tribulat Bonhommet* (1887), *Nouveaux Contes cruels* (1889), and a complete version of *Axel* in five parts, published in the review *Jeune France* (Nov. 1885–June 1886). When he died in 1889, Villiers was in the process of correcting the proofs of *Axel* in four parts (he had combined Parts II and III), the version translated in this volume. These later works, and most particularly *Axel*, repre-

sent an accumulation of literary experience, philosophical hesitations, and an increasingly bitter disgust with the degradation of man in modern society.

From the time of his arrival in Paris to the 1880's, Villiers was influenced not only by Baudelaire but, through Baudelaire, by Edgar Allan Poe, whom he considered more a master of terror than a theorist of poetry. It was perhaps also Baudelaire who introduced him to the works of the occultist Eliphas Levi. At the same time, he was engrossed in Hegelianism, although according to recent critics (see A. W. Raitt, *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste*, 1965), it would appear that he had merely a second-hand knowledge of Hegel's texts. Also, he soon conceived a passion for the works of Wagner, whose musical dramas he had seen in Germany, and whom he visited twice—first, and most importantly, in 1869 in Lucerne, where he spent some time with the composer of *The Ring*, in the company of Judith Gautier and Catulle Mendès, long before *La Revue Wagnérienne* was founded in 1885.

Those influences and meetings furnished Villiers with material for his personal quest—a search for the Ideal, to which he uncompromisingly devoted himself. And being so utterly intransigent, he was necessarily cursed. Indeed, he followed in the wake of Vigny's *Chatterton* and Baudelaire's *Albatros*. While his frightful poverty in the 1870's was a sign of that curse on a social level, it was also the source of his growing pride and an ever greater contempt for society. But there was also a metaphysical curse that weighed upon him: his whole attempt to reconcile a kind of German pessimistic idealism with Christianity led merely to rather muddled heresies and finally to failure. When Villiers at last became recognized as the master of the new generation, he was being consumed by illness, but like the great pessimists in history, that "ailing wolf," as he called himself, continued to devote all his energies to his task as a philosophical writer and to rising above his fate through his moral dandyism.

Afterword

The best of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's work consists of his tales, one novel, one character, and one play. The tales are *Les Contes cruels* and the *Nouveaux Contes cruels*, which owe a great deal to the Baudelaire of the *Petits Poèmes en prose* and to Edgar Allan Poe; they are masterpieces of often humorous ferocity, in which there is a strange mixture, in both style and content, of the frenzies of a chaotic imagination and an astonishing rigor. The novel is *L'Eve future*, a curious protest against the divine order, a science fiction fantasy that poses the problems of the relationship between science and supernatural reality. The character is Tribulat Bonhommet, who appears first in *Claire Lenoir* (1867), then in the book that bears his name, and who belongs to an illustrious race that began with Flaubert's Monsieur Homais, went on to Henri Monnier's Joseph Prudhomme, and may well have anticipated not only Alfred Jarry's Ubu but certain scientists of our own world today. The play, which Villiers had been working on since around 1870, was of course *Axel*.

Axel is an authentically dramatic work, unified by an underlying tension throughout. While from beginning to end the main question is one of spiritual aims that can be expressed only in terms of free space, sky, and expansion, all the action unfolds in enclosed, ominous places—a convent, the dark hall of an old castle, a funerary vault. At least one critic, André Lebois (in *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, révélateur du Verbe*, 1952), has pointed out the importance of the underground in Villiers and recalled that among the possible sources of *Axel* was Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864), apropos of which Michel Butor (in "Le Point suprême et l'âge d'or à travers quelques œuvres de Jules Verne," 1949, reprinted in *Répertoire I*, 1960) speaks of those "long peregrinations through darkness, sometimes lighted up by wonders but filled with dangers and the possibility of losing one's way." In them the hero who, as a matter of fact, is called Axel, tries but never succeeds in physically reaching the precise center of the earth and manages

only in dreams to exist in the center of the original nebula. *Axel* belongs to that family of romantic and postromantic works recently considered in the articles of Victor Brombert, in which the prison, the *in-pace*, the underground, and the cave are in fact privileged places where the most diverse forms of freedom, inner infinity, or at least an awareness of them, are achieved. Indeed, one might easily extend the history of this paradoxical metaphor to certain plays of Ionesco, that belated romantic or symbolist. Sara's refusal in the first part of *Axel*, the killing of the Commander in the second, the rejection of occultism in the third, and the double suicide in the fourth—all these definitive acts of liberation take place within heavy walls, dripping with dampness, sacred songs, and symbols of death or of incredible material riches.

Within such oppressive enclosures four possibilities for living (of varying degrees of nobility) are offered and rejected. The first is the total giving of oneself to Christianity. And one may say that here Villiers was playing fair—that is, was utterly sincere: he adapted the Christian doctrine—insofar as he could, insofar as he himself did—to a general idealism of German, and more especially Hegelian, origin. The second possibility is the acceptance of social, humanitarian, and utilitarian life. Here Villiers' contempt rings out in the picture he paints of the treachery of the great men of this world and in his portrait of the Commander, who is spared none of Axel's insults and is remorselessly killed by him in a duel. The third is the occultist initiation, which gives supreme power at the price of loss of personality. The fourth is the ecstatic existence of two lovers destined for one another from the beginning of time, endowed with superhuman beauty, and provided with infinite material wealth, allowing them all the means of escape.

It should be noted that gold plays a central role in both Sara's and Axel's decisions. It is in order to acquire the huge German treasure buried in the land of Axel's domaine that Sara refuses to take her vows and threatens the Archdeacon

Afterword

with death; it is in order to protect the treasure not only from the Commander but even from those to whom it originally belonged that Axel kills the Commander. Then the dead man's greed is mysteriously transferred to Axel, and it is for the gold that he rejects the sublime but indeterminate promises of Master Janus' occultism. Finally, it is the gold that brings Sara and Axel together. For the vast treasure offers the possibility of realizing an absolute, though admittedly a worldly power over the world, the satisfaction of all desires, and the fullness of life.

On the other hand, the meeting of Sara and Axel is the result of a mystical predestination within the Rosicrucian universe, and of which Master Janus had set himself up as the agent. Thus brought together in Part IV both by a supernatural destiny and an altogether earthly appetite, Axel and Sara, through their double suicide, refuse all the temptations offered them and take refuge in a Heaven, in an Infinite, where both the things of this world and spiritual doctrines, none of which could satisfy them any longer, are annihilated.

Just before his death Villiers had been correcting the proofs of *Axel*, which was then to be published in book form. When he died, he had not progressed very far with Part IV and had left a few short sketches of a different ending, in which the refusal of the gold would have led Axel to a profession of the Christian faith. According to Huysmans, Villiers had wanted to conform to the orthodox doctrines of the Church. However, his corrections, as they stand, are unusable—fortunately for the consistency of the drama—and the final text of *Axel* led to the idealistic and pessimistic denouement of the version translated in this volume.

Many elements in this dramatic poem in prose recall the works that Villiers most admired—those of Baudelaire, Poe, and above all, Wagner. The gold echoes that of *The Ring*, and the final *Liebestod* that of *Tristan and Isolde*. Even the form

Axel

has certain characteristics of the Wagnerian drama, indicating a violent reaction to the well-made play and to naturalist literature in general.

Indeed, *Axel* marked the beginning of a new tradition of poetic theater which came to be called the idealist or symbolist theater. It was characterized by the rejection of theatrical conventions that even the romantics and their imitators had respected, by characters in whom psychology was replaced by symbol, and by an overflow of language rich in imagery, intended to evoke, beyond the usual emotions, the mysteries of the soul and more especially, the lofty adventures of the Spirit, in the long development of a particular theme or often in flamboyant duets. Ferdinand Herold, Maurice Maeterlinck (who declared that he "owed everything to Villiers," although "more to his conversation than his works"), and Paul Claudel are just a few of the important followers of the dramatic tradition initiated by Villiers. Among writers of other countries, William Butler Yeats, who attended one of the performances of *Axel* in 1894, was struck by that drama "written in prose as elevated as poetry . . . [in which] all the characters are symbols and all the events allegories." Yeats recalled, in his preface to the 1925 English translation by H. P. R. Finberg (London, in an edition limited to 500 signed copies): "Even those strange sentences so much in the manner of my time . . . did not seem so important as the symbols: the forest castle, the treasure, the Lamp that had burned before Solomon. . . . [Now] I can see how those symbols became part of me, and for years to come dominated in imagination."

The spirit of the play and *Axel's* quest for the Infinite, quite as much as the symbols, left their mark on a whole generation: inspired by the intellectual adventure outlined by Mallarmé in his unfinished *Igitur*, he expanded it, and, as Remy de Gourmont remarks in *Le Livre des masques* (1896), "he reopened the closed doors of the beyond, with what a crash, and through those doors a whole generation rushed toward

Afterword

the infinite. . . . He was the doorman of the ideal." And, indeed, Axel—with his aristocratic haughtiness, his refusal of the earth that had become illusion, and his metaphysical narcissism, which led him to discover that the only true Infinite is the pure interiority of the soul—is the first great embodiment of a whole family of symbolic characters who, according to Edmund Wilson, "drop out of the common life" and choose the often tragic way of realizing the Spirit within themselves.

Jacques Guicharnaud